THE EVOLUTION OF CHINESE STUDENTS’ MOTIVATIONS TO STUDY ABROAD IN THE U.S.

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Through interviews conducted in Nanjing, China during Fall 2014, this thesis sought to examine Chinese students’ motivations to study abroad in the U.S. and how those motivations have changed over time in the context of Chinese and U.S. policy since reform and opening. Research showed that since 1979, Chinese students have more freedom of choice and economic means to expand their study abroad opportunities. Until now, the United States has been Chinese students’ primary destination of choice, but according to modern-day Chinese college students, other similarly developed countries are beginning to draw more and more Chinese students, who may choose countries like Europe, Japan, Australia, and Canada in place of, or in addition to, the U.S. Furthermore, as Chinese students see more countries’ study abroad programs as equal, they are more likely to consider more practical factors such as program costs, preferential visa policies, and existing connections within the country as they make their destination choices.
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Introduction:

In December 2012, the National Intelligence Council published “Global Trends 2030”. As an alternative futures analysis of how the world will look in 2030, it identifies multiple trends that will emerge in the next fifteen years and how they will change the world as we know it. One of these trends is profound demographic change, including international migration (2012). In the coming years, as countries cope with an increased number of immigrants, or emigrants, in the case of this thesis, each country’s broader policies towards this wave of people going abroad will reveal both their policy objectives and relations with the outside world. A country’s stance towards emigration ultimately dictates through what mechanisms its people interact with the rest of the world. As this trend emerges, no countries will be more characteristic of the complex challenges governments face in formulating these policies than China and the United States.

Since economic reform in the 1980s, thousands of Chinese nationals have traveled to the U.S. and other Western nations for study, business, and tourism in a large scale diaspora that the Chinese government struggles to regulate. The most significant group within this set is China’s students, many of whom in the past chose never to return. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, China was hemorrhaging talented students and professionals, costing the Chinese economy opportunities for innovation and development. Whether China has fully recovered from these losses remains unclear. But more recently, the number of Chinese students who study abroad, primarily in the United States, and return to contribute to China’s developing economy is rocketing upwards. An estimated 450,000 Chinese students will study abroad in 2014, with U.S.
schools remaining their top destination ("Chinese Students Flock to US", 2013). And unlike students who participated in the study abroad waves of the 1980s, the Wall Street Journal reports that approximately 72% of Chinese foreign exchange students return after graduation or after a short stint in the U.S. job force (Zhao, 2013). However, other statistics suggest that students who receive a doctorate degree in science and engineering fields are more likely to stay in the United States, especially students from China and India. In 2009, the percentage of students from China and India who were still working in the U.S. 5 years after receiving a doctorate degree was 89 percent and 79 percent respectively (Finn, 2009). This evidence raises questions about the quality of students returning to China, an issue I will address later in this thesis. Nonetheless, the sheer number of students participating in these exchanges alone highlights the emerging changes within the Sino-U.S. study abroad connection as a topic worth researching.

Furthermore, China’s close economic partnership with the United States, the primary recipient of its foreign exchange student outflow, is many times benefitted by such large scale exchange of culture and ideas. Throughout history, this relationship always occupied a sort of middle ground. Despite strained political relations, Sino-U.S. bilateral ties were always maintained because of deepening economic cooperation post-1979. In modern society, the state of bilateral relations between two countries does not necessarily directly correlate with those countries’ educational exchange trends. However, examining how different phases of Sino-U.S. relations intersect with overall study abroad trends of the time provides context for gradual development of Sino-U.S.
foreign exchange, as well as gives today’s scholars insight into how students’ individual choices fit into a global policy-dominated environment. The establishment of bilateral relations allows for student exchange in the first place, but beyond that basic starting point, a number of factors intersect to affect the volume of exchange, such as preferential policies, how one country’s people view another country, economic conditions etc. At an even deeper level, these factors play into individuals’ decisions to study abroad. That being said, when researching Sino-U.S. foreign exchange trends, there are two overall analytic viewpoints: government and individual. In this thesis, I primarily aim to study individuals’ experiences throughout the study abroad process, supplemented by research on Sino-U.S. relations to provide context.

Both large scale government policy stances and China’s domestic state of affairs have profound effects on Chinese students’ individual rationale behind and ultimate decision to study abroad, whether they realize it or not. In a certain sense, the current Chinese government faces a study abroad paradox when pandering to said students. On one hand, as the government prepares for a gradual shift from a manufacturing-based economy to a service-based economy, it is in desperate need of bright students who gain advanced knowledge through accelerated programs abroad. On the other hand, China needs prevent the outflow of knowledge and capital that occurred in the 1980s and 1990s. Fortunately for China, its economic boom has formed a natural remedy to the problem. Though an increasing number of Chinese students are studying abroad, a growing number of students are also either returning to China or setting up companies abroad that interact with China after their overseas education ends. Thus, China is
taking advantage of its “diaspora option,” attempting to take advantage of students’ talents from afar, rather than limiting the number of students studying abroad (Zweig, Fung, & Han, 2008). Additionally, since Deng Xiaoping’s reform and opening policies in 1979, otherwise known as *gaige kaifang* (改革开放), the Chinese government has established extensive study abroad scholarships and incentive programs to encourage young people to study abroad and come back with advanced knowledge, particularly in the STEM fields.

Even so, Chinese students’ decisions to study abroad are complex, depending on a variety of factors, such as their attitude towards China’s rigid style education system versus the critical thinking-based Western education system, (“Chinese demand for overseas education remains strong”, 2013), a flooded job market in which study abroad returnees are no longer necessarily as competitive as in past years, (“Plight of the sea turtles”, 2013), the rising costs associated with foreign exchange programs, and the incentives not to return, adding to the existing pool of Chinese emigrant professionals (He & Yang, 2013). Thus, this thesis seeks to answer the following questions:

- Why do modern day Chinese students choose to study abroad?
- Why did Chinese students choose to study abroad in the United States in the 1980s, 1990s, and the new millennium respectively? How have students’ motivations changed over time?
- Since reform and opening in 1979, how has the changing state of Sino-U.S. relations affected bilateral study abroad trends in general?
Why, specifically, do modern-day students choose to study abroad in the United States?

What are students’ expectations of both the country and the overall experience before they go? And for students who have already studied abroad and returned to China, were their expectations and the reality of their experiences the same?

Individual decisions make up trends. Examining the evolution of Chinese students’ motivations to study abroad will contribute to forecasts of the volume and composure of future waves of Chinese study abroad students to the U.S., as well as the nature of their connections with the U.S. in the future. The sheer volume of Chinese students alone makes the case for their importance and economic impact. Continuing to attract foreign students, especially from China which currently supplies 28.7 percent of international students in the U.S., will be essential to maintaining an economic advantage. In 2013, international students generated over 300,000 jobs and $24 billion in the U.S. economy (”The Growing Trends and Economic Impact”, 2013). Not to mention, Chinese study abroad trends give us many insights, albeit generalized, into the larger international migration picture. As we move towards a globally integrated labor market where skilled workers transcend borders, study abroad trends provide clues to future connections and investments. Students eventually become skilled workers, and the connections they make while abroad will many times transfer to their professional careers. Thus, while this thesis specifically examines individual decisions, it also helps
predict Chinese students’ future interactions with the U.S. and that impact on the U.S. economy as a whole.

Thesis Format:

This study will begin with a historical contextualization, providing a brief overview of waves of Chinese study abroad students before the 1980s, followed by a more detailed examination of the fluctuations in Sino-U.S. relations since normalization in 1979 and how the state of bilateral relations correlates with the number of Chinese students studying abroad in the U.S. To determine the “state” of bilateral relations, this study will use literature on major events such as the 1978 reform and opening (改革开 放), 1989 Tiananmen Square student uprising and China’s induction into the World Trade Organization in 2001 as fluctuation points in China’s foreign relations with the U.S. Then, this study will use open source data on Chinese students studying abroad at these specific fluctuation points and compare the two countries’ overall policies towards educational exchanges. By doing this, this study aims not only to provide a historical basis on how the changing state of Sino-U.S. relations has affected bilateral study abroad trends, but also make broader statements about how the foreign diplomacy between two countries affects international exchange.

The second part of this study will be primarily anecdotal research, a personal narrative on working as a Consular Intern at the U.S. Consulate in Guangzhou, China. These are my observations at the place where foreign policy is implemented and serve to describe the interactions between Chinese individuals and U.S. migration policy.
The third part of this study aims to examine students’ changes in motives for studying in the U.S. over time, as well as address questions of individual experiences through qualitative based interviews. Four groups of interviews will be completed: students who studied in the U.S. in the 1980s, students who studied abroad in the U.S. in the 1990s, students who studied abroad post-2000 and current students who are preparing to participate in a foreign exchange program in the U.S.

*Previous Study Abroad Participants*

Students who studied abroad in the 1980s, 1990s, or post-2000 primarily followed one of two paths. Many stayed in the U.S. on a long-term basis. They make up the group of Chinese professionals in the 1980s and 1990s who contributed to China’s severe brain drain problem until recently. I hope to capture a qualitative snapshot first of their reasoning behind why they specifically came to the U.S. to study abroad. By including their accounts, this study seeks to understand the changing benefits over time of coming to the U.S. to study abroad. In summary, why did they choose to study abroad, why the U.S., and what changes do they see in the China-U.S. foreign exchange trend? Others, however, either returned to China permanently or continue to straddle the Pacific, traveling back and forth from China to their previous study abroad and/or research destinations. These students are referred to as “sea turtles” (海归, *haigui*) and “sea gulls” (海鸥, *hai’ou*). While completing these interviews, I saw a range in the study abroad experiences, reentry experiences, and continued impact of international
educational exchange for each individual.

Students Preparing to Study Abroad

In addition to gaining a sense of students’ reasoning for studying abroad in the U.S. over the past few decades, I will also interview students who are still preparing for their study abroad experience in the United States. This group is made up of students who are actively planning on studying abroad in the near future.

The variety in qualitative data from interviewees in each of the groups will first yield results that will allow me to compare and contrast the expectations and experiences of Chinese students in the United States over different time periods. Secondly, by interviewing current students who have yet to go abroad, this study captures the reasoning behind and expectations of the newest group of Chinese foreign exchange students that plan to study in the U.S.

Literature Review

This thesis employs a two-pronged approach, first giving an overview of the changes in state policies in the context of bilateral relations since reform and opening, then, through original qualitative research, examines how, in this shifting environment, motivations to study abroad in the U.S. have changed on an individual level. Following a similar structure, the existing scholarship related to this topic can be divided into two groups: literature on the evolution of policies affecting Chinese study abroad students in
China and the U.S. respectively and literature on how these individuals make their decisions to study abroad.

*Evolution of Chinese Migration Policies*

China’s policies affecting study abroad students have experienced monumental change since Deng Xiaoping’s 1978 economic reforms. The underlying trend is that China has gradually opened up, but through examining the evolution of China’s policies towards international migration, both temporary and permanent, we can see that the Chinese government’s nuanced responses according to domestic politics of the time and the brain drain phenomenon. During China’s Maoist Era, from 1949 to 1976, Chinese students were only allowed to go to socialist states, primarily the Soviet Union, and even then, only under strict government control (explained further in Chapter 1). Since the end of this era, China’s policies have relaxed to compensate for economic growth and globalization. However, Guofu Liu argues that even with this change, China’s migration policies are not consistent with international migration law standards, stating that in order to bring adapt a migration law suitable for the modern flow of peoples across borders, China needs to transform its simple exit and entry administration laws into a full-fledged migration platform (2009). On the other hand, many scholars also argue that China actually has reason to worry about the level of openness of its international migration policies. Students are considered skilled migrants, or depending on age, skilled migrants to be. As Docquier and Rapoport point out, these skilled migrants and the skills and capital they either take away from or contribute to their
home countries are beginning to define the process of economic globalization, but unlike in the past, do not necessarily imply a complete depletion of talent, creating networks of trans-Pacific contacts (2011).

Until the late 1990s and early 2000s, brain drain, though difficult to measure, had devastating effects on China’s economy and influenced Chinese policy decisions. In an empirical analysis on the causal relationship between brain drain and poor governance and economic opportunity, de la Croix and Docquier find that there is a causal relationship between the two, which in small countries is aggravated by governmental “coordination failures”, or lack of comprehensive development policies (2011). Though China is certainly not categorized as a “small country”, its situation does fall into the sort of vicious circle de la Croix and Docquier describe—if the country’s best and brightest are emigrating, how will the economy develop to keep future generations from doing the same? Cong Cao addresses this phenomenon in a broader-based research article, concluding that in spite of many policies implemented to encourage the return of Chinese academics, existing cultural institutions such as reliance on guanxi, or “relationships”, in the job market, impede the success of academic returnees and thereby discourage their return (Cao, 2008). The interview responses described in chapter 4 will address this issue.

Chinese policies aimed at combatting brain drain date back to the late 1980s. These policies encourage students to study abroad, providing stipends and support organizations, but with the stipulation that after the student receives ample training abroad, he/ she will return to China to work for a domestic company. Other policies also
establish research subsidies and industrial parks to attract “talented” Chinese expats back to the mainland. This initiative is still referred to as the “Thousand Talents Program,” or 千人计划。In a study examining the success of this policy push, David Zweig and Huiyao Wang express extreme doubt. Zweig and Wang argue that faced with a non-transparent bureaucracy with permeating corruption, Chinese expatriates will more likely “opt for an environment that allows free thinking, debating, and writing” (p. 613). Even so, with corporations that span the globe, local economic contributions are difficult to define. As mentioned above, China can also take advantage of a “brain diaspora,” in which Chinese nationals remain overseas to work after their studies, contributing to China’s economic development from abroad (Zweig, Fung, & Han 2008). Many students interviewed in Katalin Szélényi’s study echoed this sentiment. Szélényi noted that some exchange students plan to contribute to their home countries’ economies by participating in transnational activities, concluding that “The loss of bodies, therefore, does not always imply the loss of brains as well,” (p. 84).

_Evolution of U.S. Migration Policies_

Another strain of existing scholarship focuses on the evolution of U.S. migration policies, specifically those pertaining to Chinese foreign exchange students. These policies form an institutional hurdle that Chinese students must leap over before studying in the U.S. Politics of the time determined the height of the hurdle. For example, from 1882 to 1943, the U.S. government upheld the Chinese Exclusion Act, banning virtually all Chinese immigration into the U.S. That hurdle was more like a stone
wall. Though the Act was repealed in 1943, Chinese immigrants could not enter the U.S. without restrictions until the amendments to the Immigration and Nationality Act in 1965. The amendments removed racial quotas and formed the foundation of modern-day U.S. immigration law (Green, 2002). U.S. migration law did not begin to affect the Chinese on a large scale until they began to trickle into the country in the late 1980s.

Since then, U.S. policy towards Chinese temporary immigrants, loosely defined as foreign nationals such as students and business people who come and stay temporarily, has been relatively stable, but fluctuating in response to domestic needs and international events, rather than political relations with other nations. In their analysis on the effects of immigration laws on Chinese temporary immigrants, especially students, Dudley Poston and Hua Luo point out two laws of note (2007). The first is the Immigration Act of 1990, which set higher caps on immigration than the Immigration Reform and Control Act. This act affected all immigrant categories across the board and was an important milestone in American immigration law that was hailed as a “return to the pre-1920s open door immigration policy of the United States” (Bell, 2012, par. 1). The second law, even more salient to the Chinese, was the Chinese Protection Act of 1992, implemented in reaction to China’s Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989. This Act granted Chinese temporary immigrants (emphasizing students) permanent resident status to prevent their political repression upon return to Mainland China. Much argument focuses on the effectiveness of the Act. Though directed towards students, Poston and Luo conclude that this act actually ended up benefitting many skilled, but potentially illegal, workers from China’s coastal provinces (Poston & Luo, 2007).
However, others conclude that suddenly switching to permanent resident status gave students (who made up about half of the applicants) significant economic benefits (Orrenius, Zavodny, & Kerr, 2012).

U.S. immigration policy entered a more conservative stage after the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001. A large volume of scholarship is dedicated to chronicling the policy changes that took place after the commencement of the war on terror. After the attack, U.S. immigration institutions were used as tools for maintaining national security, functioning both as a gateway and a net. As a gateway, U.S. immigration institutions continued to accept a large number of foreign tourists, students, and business people, though there was a noticeable dip in visitors until after 2004. At the same time, these institutions also functioned as a net, rewired to catch potential threats to homeland security (Frederking, 2012; Iyer & Rathod, 2011). However, after a rebound in foreign immigration after 2004, U.S. immigration law towards Chinese immigrants has remained relatively stable and open, becoming even more liberal with President Obama’s planned immigration reforms following the November 2014 APEC Summit.

*Individual Motivations to Study Abroad*

The following content includes both material on general factors influencing the choice to study abroad and material on factors that applies to Chinese students’ decisions specifically. One study creates a useful framework in analyzing the various components of the student’s decision making process determining whether he/she travels abroad. The student considers factors that determine whether or not he/she
should study abroad, factors that influence the location decision, and factors beyond his/her control such as money constraints or visa barriers (Eder, Smith, & Pitts, 2010). Additionally, another study finds support for the strong pull of an existing network of foreign students in the area of choice (Beine, Noël, & Ragot, 2014). This literature is important to keep in mind when analyzing the decision making processes of Chinese students specifically.

Vast existing literature on the factors influencing Chinese students’ decisions to study abroad suggests that these decisions are a complex mix of cultural, domestic, and international factors. These factors commonly include a desire to improve economic position or societal status, disillusionment with the Chinese education system, curiosity about foreign cultures or languages, and a lack of choice—if a student does not test high enough on the Chinese college entrance exams or is studying a subject that he/she cannot get enough information about in China, the student will have no choice but to go abroad (Yao, 2004). The U.S. has always been a beacon for Chinese study abroad students, who flocked there for economic opportunity in a merit-based system (Yan & Berliner, 2010).

Though a broad selection of literature on Chinese study abroad trends exists, there are a few gaps that this study aims to fill. First, this study will provide a broader analysis of the connection between Sino-U.S. relations and Chinese study abroad trends. Secondly, this study will also yield some insight into individual experiences after students study abroad. Many studies focus on the experience of Chinese foreign
exchange students in their country of study, but fail to address the challenges these students face once returning. Most importantly, this study will use qualitative data to compare and contrast Chinese students’ motivations to study abroad in the U.S. since reform and opening. As pointed out above, the literature on individual motivations to study abroad is vast, but very few studies examine how these motivations and factors changed over time in the context of Sino-U.S. relations and Chinese educational exchanges with the U.S.
Ch. 1: A Brief History of China’s Educational Exchanges (Qing Dynasty-1978)

Qing Dynasty

The foundations for the wave of study abroad students between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century began with China’s increased international trade before the Opium Wars. In the 17th century, the British Empire imported large volumes of goods like tea and porcelain to China, primarily regulated through the Qing Dynasty’s trading post of Canton (or present-day Guangzhou). However, amid growing concerns that they were flooding the Chinese market with currency, Britain sought to balance their trade deficit by planting then exporting large quantities of opium to China (Perdue, 2011). However, the Chinese military and government officials’ increasing addiction to opium, combined with the outflow of silver to the British Empire that destabilized the economy, led to the government’s eventual ban on opium and the ensuing Anglo-Chinese conflicts from 1839-1842 and 1856-1860.

It was in this atmosphere of increased trade and contact with the West and Western culture that China’s first group of study abroad students, notably Yung Wing (or Rong Hong, 容閎, by some accounts) ventured to America in January of 1847. Yung was afforded unusual educational opportunities at an early age, attending a missionary school in Macao rather than the Chinese Confucian schools that were the norm. The school was closed during the first Opium War from 1839 to 1842, but reopened afterwards under the leadership of Reverend Brown, a graduate of Yale University, who ultimately ferried Yung to his alma mater (“Imperial Students,” n.d.). Yung became a U.S. citizen in 1852, graduated from Yale in 1854, and returned to China in 1855 with the
goal of establishing a program called the Chinese Educational Mission to provide other Chinese students the same opportunities to go abroad. Though some conservatives in the Qing court protested Yung’s program, wary of foreign imperialist influences, the Chinese Educational Mission in the U.S. was ultimately successful. After humiliating defeats in both Opium Wars, the Qing Dynasty realized that in order to survive on an increasingly connected international stage, they had no choice but to adopt the modern technology and ideology of their Western counterparts. In 1870 and 1871, Yung himself selected students to attend a preparatory school in Shanghai to study English and Western culture. This became one of the first 培训班 (peixunban, or “specialized pre-departure programs”), which are now commonplace in China and will be discussed in later chapters (“This Month in History: Chinese Educational Mission Students in the 19th Century,” 2010). Beginning in August of 1872, every year for four years, the Qing Dynasty sent 30 Chinese students between the ages of 10 and 16 to America to study for a total of 15 years at top rated American institutions such as Yale and Harvard while hosted by American families (Zhang, 2011). After four years, the program was discontinued due to an increasingly large conservative influence in the Qing courts, but the students, then totaling 120, returned to China to become professionals that led modernization efforts in naval, railroad, and telecommunications industries (Peng, 2004).

Yung’s work paved the way for study abroad efforts that continued until the demise of the Qing Dynasty. As Japan rose on the world stage, physically and economically intact after avoiding the equivalent of China’s Opium Wars, the country became more of a threat to Chinese sovereignty. Aware that the modernization of the
navy and industrial sectors had become a policy priority, Qing officials sent more than a hundred students to naval academies in Germany, France, and Britain in the late 1870s and 1880s (“Imperial Students”, n.d.). Some of the first negative affects the government felt as a result of the influences of foreign education came after the study abroad wave to Japan in the late 1890s and early 20th century. At this time, a mix of both government-sponsored and self-sponsored students flocked to Japan to learn about its Meiji Restoration. As these students grew in numbers and began trickling back into China, they formed the backbone of the Xinhai Revolution that overthrew the government in 1911 and the constituency of Sun Yat-Sen’s United League Party (Zhang, 2011). Thus, the Qing Dynasty offers interesting parallels to the Chinese government’s study abroad paradox today. Though China’s study abroad students were a tool for modernization, in certain cases, some contend, they also endangered the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (Sheehan, 2013).

New Cultural Movement Era, 新文化运动 (Xin Wenhua Yundong)

After the fall of the Qing Dynasty, a new republic was established in China, but it was still riddled by some of the same problems as the feudal society under the dynastic system: “lack of a healthy economy and an educated middle class, elements necessary to sustain any strong democracy,” (Butler, 2007, par. 14). This era was characterized by a rebellion against traditional Chinese ideologies in favor of philosophies, such as Marxism, that originated abroad, as well as scientific developments. Its culmination, the May Fourth Movement in 1919, is generally viewed as the point in Chinese history that

This Movement not only introduced the ideas that provided the foundation for modern China’s system of governance, but also spurred another wave of study abroad students to both the Soviet Union and Europe, many of whom eventually became prominent Communist Party leaders. These leaders included notables such as Deng Xiaoping and Zhou Enlai, and increased cooperation with the Soviet Union’s Leninist Party produced a group of intellectuals dedicated to Marxist ideology, which by 1930 numbered at over 2,000 (“The legacy of overseas study for China’s early leaders: Deng Xiaoping”, 2011; Zhang, 2011).

*Kuomintang Era*

Authors Ma Ying and Hans-Michael Trautwein refer to the decade of 1927 to 1937 as “the golden era of China’s economic development,” (2013, p. 181). The Kuomintang had established itself as a government after the end of China’s Warlord Era and was still pursuing policies of industrial modernization, an epic upheaval in an agrarian society. Because of this, most Chinese students studying abroad pursued higher education degrees in fields related to economics (Ma & Trautwein, 2013). Additionally, after the Boxer Rebellion in 1901, an uprising aimed at combatting imperialist foreign intervention, China was forced to pay approximately $300 million of indemnity to the “Great Powers” that intervened: Britain, France, Germany, Japan, Russia, and the U.S. The U.S. then diverted part of the money to the Boxer Rebellion Indemnity Scholarship.
Program, a scholarship fund for Chinese foreign exchange students studying abroad in America, which Ma and Trautwein identify as the primary study abroad destination during this time (2013). In preparation for the wave of outgoing exchange students, China established another school dedicated to preparing students to study abroad, Tsing Hua College in Beijing (“Archives: Boxer Rebellion Indemnity and First Student at Beloit,” n.d.). The push for industrialization and development, along with readily available funding led to the exodus of hundreds of Chinese exchange students per year starting in the decade of 1927 to 1937 (Zhang, 2011).

After WWII, or what the Chinese refer to as the Anti-Japanese War, began to wane in 1945, the Kuomintang once again began prompting students to go abroad to continue gaining technical training to modernize the nation. However, just one year later in 1946, the Chinese Civil War between the Communists and the Nationalists broke out, once again stalling foreign exchange program efforts (Zhang, 2011).

*Maoist Era*

After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China under the Chinese Communist Party in October 1949, the Party strove to use the Soviet Union’s bureaucratic model to reorganize the remnants of the Nationalist government structure and continue efforts aimed at large-scale mobilization and industrialization. In the September 1949 Common Program of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, the government laid out a plan to embark on agrarian reform and the nationalization of enterprises for “development of the nation’s power and for its
industrialization,” (Chinese People’s PCC, 1949). To develop the scientific tools necessary, China sent approximately 10,000 people to the Soviet Union to study abroad in the 1950s, about 7,500 students and 2,500 university teachers and scientists pursuing higher education degrees. The early 1950s marked the peak in Sino-Soviet relations. In addition to high numbers of foreign exchange students from both countries, China and the U.S.S.R. signed a bilateral agreement in 1957 to cooperate on hundreds of industrialization projects in fields such as military technology, mining, and heavy industry (“China-Soviet Influence in the 1950s,” 1987). The few Chinese students who returned from studying in the U.S. and England during this time period went on to play pioneering roles in establishing China’s atomic and hydrogen bomb programs (Hannas, Mulvenon & Puglisi, 2013).

However, China’s suspicion towards the Soviet Union’s security policies, economic policies, and what Mao saw as a watered down strain of Communism began to emerge in the late 1950s and gained momentum throughout the 1960s. In the late 1950s, from the Chinese government’s point of view, the Soviet Union did not sufficiently support the mainland in re-annexing Taiwan, and further aggravated ties by remaining neutral throughout conflicts on the Sino-Indian border (“China- Sino-Soviet Relations”, n.d.). Ideological divides were even starker. In his speech criticizing the Soviet Union in 1959, Mao pointed out the leadership’s revisionist policies and condemned the Soviet Union for “organizing a big anti-Chinese chorus together with the imperialists and reactionary nationalists, and the Tito revisionists” (“Mao Zedong- Outline...”, 1959). Sino-Soviet relations reached a final freezing point in the midst of the
Great Leap Forward, a manifestation of Mao’s extreme version of Communism. Though the close alliance with USSR was eventually severed, the Soviet Union’s influence on China’s government structure and the cadres who filled it was unparalleled. China inherited its *nomenklatura* system, the governmental structure in which the Communist Party maintains power through its ability to grant and take away the leadership positions in all government spheres, from the Soviet Union, sometimes still referred to by the Chinese as “big brother”, or *da gege* (大哥哥) (Heilmann & Kirchberger, 2000).

Also, such influential figures as former President Jiang Zemin, Premier Li Peng, and Vice Premier Zou Jiahua all studied abroad in the Soviet Union in the 1950s (Zhang, 2011).

A few brief years later, the Cultural Revolution from 1966-1976 marked a dry spell for Chinese educational exchange. Because before the Cultural Revolution, a university education was reserved for young people with well-connected families, the Mao-encouraged battle against all things bourgeoisie also included a concentrated effort to overturn the education itself, which succeeded with the abolition of the Education Ministry in 1966 (Milner, n.d.). With the domestic education bureaucracy crumbling from within, continued international educational exchange was out of the question. A whole generation of students, referred to as the “lost generation,” were deprived of an education, many sent to perform manual labor in the countryside to learn from farmers and peasants about a quintessentially non-bourgeois way of life (You, 2012). International exchange would only start to trickle again once China opened up to the West in the 1970s, forming the foundation of the world’s largest educational exchange.
China’s history of international educational exchange, or in some time periods lack thereof, served as a primary motivation to interview participants who studied abroad in the 1980s and 1990s, as I will discuss in later chapters. Furthermore, the early history I outline above serves to underline the stark contrast between Chinese students’ study abroad opportunities in the 1970s and their opportunities now, just a few decades later. In the next chapter, I describe both the U.S. and China’s foreign exchange policies during the 1980s, 1990s, and post-2000, the time periods during which my interviewees studied abroad. This will provide context for my observations at the Consulate, the venue where these policies are implemented, as well as my interviews.
Chapter 2: Chinese Students in the U.S. in the Context of Sino-U.S. Relations

As China and the U.S. become even closer via cultural and educational exchange, it is important to understand the context on which this relationship was built. Furthermore, this chapter serves as a foundation as I compare and contrast Chinese students’ motivations to study abroad in the U.S. and general impressions of the American society and educational system in later chapters. Below, I introduce major events in Sino-U.S. relations, corresponding educational and cultural exchange policies, and data that illustrate the volume and characteristics of students studying abroad at the time.

From Deng Xiaoping’s reform and opening policies in 1978 to the present time, the scope of this project’s research, the general trend in Sino-U.S. ties can be characterized by increasingly high volume of educational exchange. The chart below provides an overview of the total number of Chinese students in the U.S. as far back as reliable data is recorded. This data represents the manifestation of the international events and policies governing Sino-U.S. educational exchange described in the following pages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Number of Chinese Students in the U.S.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1949</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1954</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>10,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>33,390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>39,403</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1: Total number of Chinese students in the U.S., 1949-2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>39,613</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>42,503</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>46,958</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>51,001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>54,466</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>59,939</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>63,211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>64,757</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>61,765</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>62,523</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>62,582</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>67,723</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>81,127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>98,235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>127,628</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>157,558</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>194,029</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>235,597</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Institute of International Education: Open Doors Data Report

The data used to represent the total number of Chinese students in the U.S. is from the Open Doors Data Report published annually by the Institute of International Education (IIE), as I judge this to be the most complete and accurate statistical report. In the chart, the year 1949 is represents the time span of the years 1949 to 1950 (2009). Please note that data for the 1980s and early 1990s is less complete than the data in more recent years, in the sense that it is either nonexistent, does not include as many details about student demographics, or both. Working under these limitations, in the following pages I summarize the three time periods my interviews will cover.

The 1980s: Normalization and Initiation

Throughout World War 2 and the Cold War, formally establishing ties with China was only a slim possibility mired with political trip wires. America’s support of the Nationalists during World War 2 wed the U.S. to Taiwan after China’s Civil War, and to an extent, this relationship continues today. American support of Taiwan combined with China’s extreme ideology and alliance with the Soviet Union in the early stages of the Cold War made establishing ties tricky at best. However, after the Communist Party...
solidified itself as a governing body in the mainland and began to splinter from the
Soviet Union in the late 1950s, forming an alliance with the People’s Republic of China
became more and more appealing (Sutter, 2010).

Additionally, America’s economic boom introduced a need for highly skilled
immigrants including students, leading to a series of new laws encouraging increased
international exchange, especially with Asian countries, whose immigrant quotas had
until then been severely limited by the Chinese Exclusion Act. These laws included the
1952 Immigration and Nationality Act and its 1962 revisions, as well as the 1965
Immigration Reform and Nationality Act, which put an end to the caps on the number of
immigrants per country that were allowed entry into the U.S., thereby further
liberalizing U.S. immigration law (Green, 2002).

In 1969, the Nixon Doctrine limited American military presence in Asia, resulting
in decreased regular naval patrols of the Taiwan Strait as the U.S. began looking towards
relations with China. Two years later, in 1971, the U.S. and China engaged in “Ping-Pong
diplomacy,” an exchange of the two countries’ Ping-Pong teams that served as the first
semi-official delegation from the U.S. sent to China in over 20 years (“U.S.- China
Chronology”, n.d.). This people-to-people exchange paved the way for President Nixon’s
official visit to the People’s Republic of China in 1972, making history as the first
American president to ever visit mainland China. While in country, the American
delegation was highly monitored, and many times the Chinese people were not allowed
to approach any of the diplomats. Footage from Ambassador Nicholas Platt showed
empty streets that would have usually been bustling with bikers, vendors, and
pedestrians (Platt, 2014). This only goes to show the extent of the contrast that would soon emerge between the alien nature of foreign relations between the U.S. and China during this inaugural visit and the ever more familiar relations in visits to come. In 1972, President Nixon and Chairman Mao stated their positions on a number of outstanding political issues through the Shanghai Communiqué. Finally, in 1978, then President Carter and Premiere Deng Xiaoping reached an agreement on the normalization of U.S.-China relations, formally establishing diplomatic ties. These ties formed an essential part of Deng’s reform and opening policies, or 改革开放, “a great revolution aimed at liberalizing and developing China’s societal productive forces and realizing China’s modernization,” (“改革开放”, n.d.).

China’s economic modernization was also very closely related to its development of the higher education sector. Following reform and opening in 1978, there was a large push to upgrade vocational schools to colleges, colleges to universities, and so on, thereby expanding higher education opportunities for the masses. However, this also revealed China’s lack of qualified teachers and professionals. One way to address this problem was by educating new teachers via international exchange, leading to what students at the time referred to as 出国热 (chuguo re), or the craze to study abroad (Ma, 2003).

Shortly after, in 1978, the U.S. and China came to a number of agreements on student and scholar exchange. At the time, only about 50 Chinese students were enrolled in universities across the U.S., but with the “Open Door Policy,” the number of Chinese students in the United States rose exponentially (Yan & Berliner, 2011). In 1979,
there were approximately 1,000 Chinese students in the U.S., up from just over 20 in 1974, and by the mid-1980s, this number had increased tenfold. By 1989, the number of exchange students stood at 33,390 ("International Student Totals by Place of Origin, 2009). At the time, these students were primarily PhD students. Though their numbers fluctuated slightly with the U.S. economy’s downturns in 1970, from 1973 to 1975, and from 1980 to 1982, by 1990, the number of Chinese students who had come to the U.S. for a doctorate degree totaled at over 35,000 (Liang, 2011).

In 1984, there was a fundamental shift in the nature of the study abroad process. During China’s Maoist era, it was customary for the Chinese government to fund its best and brightest to go abroad either to fellow socialist states such as the USSR or to Europe where leftist ideas were also blossoming. However, in 1984, the State Council of China stated that any student who received admission to a foreign institution and was receiving outside financial support could apply to go abroad through means other than Chinese government scholarship (Yan & Berliner, 2011). By 1985, only 17 percent of Chinese students traveling abroad were government-funded (Orleans, 1988). During the 1980s, the United States, which was enjoying a sort of technological revolution, also reaped the benefits from these highly skilled temporary immigrants. In fact, many of the graduate students who came to study the high level sciences that China needed decided to stay in the United States. From 1978 to 1989, the average ratio of returnees to total number of Chinese students abroad was only approximately 37.98 percent. Some of the participants in this study are part of this majority group, still living and working in the
U.S. As illustrated by the graph below, the return ratio reached above 50 percent only once, in 1984 (Cao, 2008).

![Percentage of Chinese Returnees, 1978-1989](image)

Figure 1: Chinese student return ratio after studying abroad

By the late 1980s, Chinese officials began to realize that the country was quickly hemorrhaging talented students in a severe “brain drain”. However, how the Chinese government dealt with the brain drain phenomenon had just as much to do with domestic political struggles as it did with the economic factors associated with brain drain. By 1986, to the Communist Party, it seemed that even students who remained in Mainland China were absorbing Western ideas and using them to weaken the Party’s grip on power. In 1986, a protest began in Hebei, Anhui Province over the officials slated

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2 Ratio calculated by comparing the total number of Chinese students departing to study abroad and the total number of Chinese students returning from studying abroad in a particular year. For example, in 1978, 860 students departed and 248 students returned, resulting in a return ratio of 28.84 percent.
for election in the local People’s Congress. Students demanded more direct participation in elections, calling for direct election of candidates. The protests in Hebei sparked other pro-democracy protests on college campuses in major cities across China, creating an ideological crisis for the Chinese government (“China- The Third Wave of Reform”, n.d.).

Even considering the threat this posed for the Chinese Communist Party, at that time there was still some conflict within the government over how to deal with the brain drain problem—the State Education Commission advocated greater restrictions on students studying abroad, while the State Science and Technology Commission wanted to try and take advantage of overseas educated students—after the series of protests, Party conservatives won out (Zweig, Fung, & Han, 2008).

In 1987, Premier Deng Xiao Ping made a speech arguing for tighter restrictions on international student exchange, especially to the United States. This speech, and its more formal written version dubbed Document No. 749, proposed lowering the number of Chinese students studying abroad in the United States from the current 68 percent of the total number of Chinese students abroad to 20 percent of total students abroad. The document also pressured students then studying in the United States to return to China (Zweig & Wang, 2013). These policies continued for the next few years and from the Chinese government’s point of view, they were galvanized by the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989. Immediately following the Tiananmen Square incident, the government mandated a “country service period,” or a period of time spent working in mainland China, for students that wished to bear the costs of studying abroad—five years for undergraduates and seven years for graduate students (Cao, 2008). Thus,
statistics reflect a slight dip in the number of Chinese students studying abroad in this time period.

However, it is worth noting that these overarching policies only reflect the conservative slant that temporarily won out in Chinese politics of the time. Other government backed initiatives reflected the varying views on the brain drain phenomenon briefly mentioned in the paragraph above. For example, in 1989, postdoctoral research centers were established as an incentive for talented students abroad to return to China, and students with an overseas STEM field education were given hiring preference at research institutes and state enterprises (Zweig, Fung, & Han, 2008). Though the initiative to attract students, or at least the knowledge they had gained while abroad, back to China continues to the present day, the conservative isolationism phase was quickly dismantled. By the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Chinese government realized that global exchange was essential in not only economic success, but also survival.

The 1990s: Taking Advantage of Exchange

If the 1980s were characterized by a mass exodus of Chinese study abroad students, then the 1990s marked the beginning of a return migration of “sea turtles,” or 海归 (haigui), the Chinese name for students returned from an education abroad. Though China did not fully rebound from brain drain crisis of the late 1980s and early 1990s, the returnee trend made a significant step in balancing the exchange with the U.S. While China worked to reap the benefits of expanding Sino-U.S. exchange, the
United States also further liberalized its immigration laws to supplement its severely depleted skilled worker population. This expansion in educational exchange developed in tandem with events signifying China’s rise on the global stage. Thus, the 1990s served as a link between the infant stage Sino-U.S. relations of the 1980s and the increasingly close partnership we see today.

Following the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, the U.S. Bush Administration enacted two major immigration laws. The first law, the Immigration Act of 1990, further liberalized American immigration policy, increasing the caps on the number of legal immigrants to the U.S. It also provided more channels for immigrants hoping to become permanent U.S. residents to obtain worker visas, especially in priority fields like scientific research and medicine (Bell, 2012). This would have also been of interest to students at the time, who could then with the sponsorship of either a family member or employer, more easily gain lawful permanent resident (LPR) status in the United States.

In 1992, U.S. Congress enacted the Chinese Protection Act of 1992, providing an entirely different channel of immigration for Chinese students still in China and Chinese students already studying in the United States. Preluded by Executive Order 12711, which was issued April 11, 1990 and allowed students in the United States during or immediately after the protests to stay until January 1, 1994, the Chinese Protection Act of 1992 allowed Chinese citizens who entered the United States before Executive Order 12711, regardless of visa type, to apply for LPR status (“Executive Order of April 11”, 1990). Approximately 75 percent of those who applied for LPR status under this law entered the United States on skilled visas, and about half of the total number of
applicants were foreign exchange students (Orrenius, Zavodny, & Kerr, 2012). The combination of these two laws created an incentive for Chinese students and skilled workers already in the United States to stay, while also attracting additional students from China, contributing to an acute brain drain that China struggled to plug.

For China, the first step to stemming the talent outflow, or 人才外流 (rencai wailiu) was addressing the restrictive policies implemented in response to the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989. Liberal policies implemented in the United States in the early 1990s aggravated China’s already existing problem by providing its emigrating nationals more avenues for immigration. However, the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 showed the Chinese government that in order to merely survive in a globalizing economy, international educational exchange was necessary. This sentiment to quickly internationalize manifested itself in China’s bid in 1993 to host the 2000 Olympic Games, the largest and most prestigious international exchange that would serve as China’s global unveiling. China lost to Sydney, Australia by a mere two votes (“China & Oly Mov”, n.d.). Even when occasionally shrouded by tense upper-level Sino-U.S. relations, exchanges continued virtually unhindered. In May 1995, President Clinton agreed to allow Taiwan’s president to visit the U.S., sowing distrust in Sino-U.S. relations (Sutter, 1996). Even so, in the fiscal year 1994-1995, almost 40,000 Chinese students went abroad to study in the U.S., up from just over 33,000 in the year 1988-1989 (“International Student Totals by Place of Origin”, 2009). China’s domestic policies in the context of international events show that the early 1990s marked the beginning of a fundamental shift in China’s strategy to cope with brain drain. Rather than put
restrictions on foreign study, the Chinese government would enact policies that encouraged students to return.

In 1992, during a tour throughout Southeast China promoting economic development through international exchange, Premier Deng invited back students abroad, beckoning them with the promise that all the “class enemy” stereotypes touted after the Tiananmen Square demonstrations would be forgotten (Cao, 2008; Zweig, Fung, & Han, 2008). Furthermore, after these students returned to China, they would be granted significantly greater freedom of movement including the freedom to travel abroad again, as well as the freedom to move to a city outside their hukou registered city for work (Zweig & Rosen, 2003). This was cemented in public opinion through the Central Committee’s November 1993 slogan, “Support overseas study, encourage returnees to China, grant the freedom to come and go.” (Zweig, Fung, & Han, 2008). Government initiatives aimed at pooling Chinese academic talent from abroad are summarized in Table 2 below and explained in more detail in the following paragraphs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Program</th>
<th>Year Implemented</th>
<th>Program Benefits</th>
<th>Government Agency</th>
<th>Estimated # of Beneficiaries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One Hundred Talents Program</td>
<td>1994; Expanded in 1998</td>
<td>2 million RMB research fund, housing, salary</td>
<td>Chinese Academy of Sciences</td>
<td>800</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

³ The Chinese household registration system, or hukou system, governs Chinese citizens’ services such as health care and education based on their geographic area of residence.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Initiative Details</th>
<th>Funding Source</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National Science Fund for Distinguished Young Scholars</td>
<td>1994; Expanded in 1999</td>
<td>Research funding</td>
<td>National Natural Science Fund of China</td>
<td>1,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring Light Project</td>
<td>1996; Expanded in 1998</td>
<td>Financial support for short-term visits</td>
<td>Ministry of Education</td>
<td>12,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changjiang Scholars Program</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Professorships and Changjiang Scholar Achievement Awards</td>
<td>Ministry of Education</td>
<td>14,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HOME (Help our Motherland through Elite Intellectual Resources from Overseas) Program</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Funds for startup projects in various industries (agriculture, biomedical, IT, etc.)</td>
<td>Chinese Association for Science and Technology</td>
<td>375 persons, 165 enterprises (as of 2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thousand Talents Program</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Short-term: 500,000 RMB &amp; professorship with 3-yr. contract Long-term: 1-2 million RMB &amp; professorship</td>
<td>Organization Dept. of Central Committee of the Communist Party</td>
<td>Goal: 1000 professors in the next five to ten years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This table is a combination of statistics pulled from the following sources: Zweig, Fung, & Han 2008; Cao, 2008; Wang, H., 2010, and Cai, 2009.

Table 2: Chinese government initiatives aimed at attracting and retaining Chinese academics
The Chinese government’s statements on liberalization were then backed by a number of programs geared towards attracting scholars to Chinese universities. The inaugural program, the Chinese Academy of Science’s “One Hundred Talent Program” initiated in 1994, enjoyed great success. Aimed at attracting at least one hundred young scientists abroad back to China by the end of the century with offers of upwards of 2 million RMB for research, housing, and salary, the program had succeeded in enrolling over 800 scientists in the program by September 2002 ("100 Talents Program", 2012; Cao, 2008). In 1998, as a testament to its success, the Chinese Academy of Science expanded the program’s resources and aimed to recruit one hundred elite scientists each year from 1998 to 2001, which is one explanation for the overall increase in returned scientists at that time (Zweig, Fung, & Han, 2008).

Also aimed at attracting young talented scientists, the National Science Fund for Distinguished Young Scholars, or sometimes referred to as the National Outstanding Youth Foundation, provided funding for scientists’ individual research interests. After proving its efficacy, in 1999 the program was granted a large funding increase, from an annual $70 million before 1999 to an annual $180 million afterwards (Cao, 2008). The program is also fairly competitive. From 1994 to 2001, only 710 out of 3000 applications were approved for research, the vast majority of which were young men from Chinese Academy of Science affiliated universities (Cao & Suttmeier, 2001). From 1994 to 2004, the program funded research for 1,174 scholars (Cai, 2009).

Similar programs include the Cheung Kong Scholars Program, launched in 1998 to cater to the same demographic as the two other scholarship programs explained
above: talented scientists abroad under the age of 45 (Cao, 2008). These scientists could engage in scientific research in areas the government deemed strategic, as well as serve as visiting professors at elite universities (Zweig, Fung, & Han, 2008). From 1998 to 2007, the program recruited 1,308 scholars (Cai, 2009). Another related program dubbed the “Spring Light Program,” or 春晖计划 (chunhui jihua), beckoned scientists from abroad for shorter stints—mere months at a time—to conduct research at Chinese universities. Over 12,000 scientists have become recipients of this grant since 1996 when it was established (Wang, H., 2010).

However, it is difficult to measure the actual impact of these programs because of two main phenomena. First, the large number of overlapping programs aimed at recruiting top scientists resulted in many scientists being simultaneously enrolled in more than one scholarship program. For example, one scientist may have received a grant for individual research under the “Spring Light Program,” while also enjoying elite status as a professor in the Cheung Kong Scholars Program. Therefore, the number of recruits does not fully reflect the efficacy of each policy. Second, most of the above listed grants were geared towards research on a temporary basis, for instance either for three years under the One Hundred Talents Program, or as short as a few months under the Spring Light Program. A Ministry of Education survey conducted in 2000 revealed that only 44 percent of the 551 scientists that had established enterprises in the Chinese
government constructed specialized scientific research parks were permanent Chinese residents (Zweig, Fung, & Han, 2008). 4

So what, then, was the significance of these initiatives for students either preparing to go abroad or already studying abroad in the 1990s? Keep in mind that during the 1990s, the majority of students studying abroad were still post-graduate students. On the whole, these programs offered a broader swath of options for potential returnees, options that did not necessarily provide all the human capital benefits of the talented students to either the United States or China exclusively. Instead, they formed the foundation for what the Chinese Communist Party moderates' strategy beginning in the late 1980s: take advantage of the knowledge students gained abroad, rather than engage in a futile attempt to stop the ever increasing outflow of students. The 1990s thus saw the rise of two different groups of students that would become even more prominent after the turn of the century: “sea turtles,” or returnees from overseas exchange and “sea gulls,” students who straddle the Pacific, contributing to the human capital of both the U.S. and China and triggered the brain circulation that would become more common in the 2000s (Wang, H., 2010).

The New Millennium: Full Scale Brain Circulation

Current Chinese Policies and Trends

The 2000s saw China’s full integration into the global economy. After Asia rebounded from its 1997-1998 economic bust, China made significant developments in global trade, first by gaining Permanent Normal Trade Status with the U.S. in 2000, then with its official entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001 (“U.S.-China Chronology”, n.d.; “China and the WTO”, n.d.). In 2008, China’s deepening economic ties with the U.S. were realized when China surpassed Japan to become the U.S.’s largest foreign creditor (“China’s US Treasury Holdings”, 2013). Chinese educational exchange trends in the 2000s were largely a continuation of the trends established in the 1990s, the only major difference being their mass commercialization. Businesses on both sides of the Pacific were spawned in response to the growing level of exchange, especially in China where a market emerged dedicated to training students in skills necessary to succeed in the U.S. education system, consulting families on college decisions, and even helping write portions of Chinese students’ applications to overseas universities.

China’s government further developed policies that encouraged brain circulation rather than brain drain, which were spurred on by a growing middle class and an exponential growth in the number of students studying abroad in the U.S. The Chinese government even developed a slogan for this strategy, “Serve the nation without returning to the nation,” (Zweig, Fung, & Han, 2008). Some international events tested Sino-U.S. relations at the higher levels, but this tension did not trickle down into people-to-people educational exchanges. For instance, some claim that the 1999
bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade allowed the Chinese government to ferment widespread anti-Americanism at the time, but even if that was the case, it is neither reflected in statistics showing Chinese students abroad in the U.S. nor in this study’s interview responses (Griffiths, 2014). The number of foreign exchange students rose from 51,000 to over 63,000 in the years 1998 to 2001 (“International Student Totals by Place of Origin”, 2009).

Throughout the 2000s, Chinese institutions developed various programs designed to attract overseas talent, both Chinese and foreign. These were built on the tenets of original programs developed in the 1990s—emphasis on science and technology and temporary travel to China, but at the same time encouraging continued dialogue and shared research. Worth mentioning are the “HOME: Help Our Motherland Through Elite Resources Overseas” Program of 2004, which spawned over 150 projects focusing on agriculture, medicine, and other high tech industries, as well as the “1,000 Talents Scheme” of 2008, which aimed to recruit 1,000 distinguished scholars by 2018 (Cai, 2009). The still continuing “1,000 Talents Scheme,” like other similar programs of the past, offers a $150,000 lump sum, housing funds, and office space for talented academics looking to conduct research and/or business in China (Ford, 2012).

As it turns out, China may have exceedingly high expectations for its talent development programs. According to the country’s mid- to long-term talent development program, or “国家中长期人才发展规划纲要 (2010-2020 年)”, by 2020 China will have 180 million “talented persons,” a broad category that includes graduate students, high level managers, and STEM field professionals (“2020 年：我国人才总量
增至 1.8 亿", 2010). However, return rate statistics do not fully reflect the state of China’s brain circulation, namely, they measure the quantity of the students that return, but fail to measure their quality. The “Thousand Talents Scheme” is currently under a midterm review for attracting low numbers of professionals with overseas PhDs. Moreover, the ones that did return only committed to short term research contracts (Sharma, 2013). Though we have established that short term visits do not necessarily imply short term exchange of knowledge or skills, the normalization of brain circulation through piecemeal research and exchange makes it hard to measure exactly what benefits China is reaping. Many contend that China’s failure to attract talented students and researchers for long-term stints lies in the Chinese education system’s deeply rooted flaws (Abrahamsen, 2012). Thus, in order to compete in the international academic community, since the turn of the century, China has also invested more funds into reforming its rigid education system from the grassroots up.

For decades, entry into China’s college system has primarily depended on the gaokao, the infamous Chinese college entrance exam that requires students memorize facts and regurgitate them on test day. The origins of this practice lie partly in the Confucian notion that the quality of a man lies in his education, not in his family background. Students’ gaokao scores can arguably define their positions in society throughout life, deciding the quality of schools they attend, and therefore the quality of job offers they receive in the future. Though the exam was originally designed to promote equality in the university admissions process, the overemphasis on gaokao scores has led to an unhealthy education system that places emphasis on numerical
scores alone, rather than cultivating students’ critical thinking skills or creativity. In fact, in the effort to prepare students to take the *gaokao*, the three mandated school years in Chinese high schools only include two years of curriculum, with the last year spent on test preparation alone (‘美国中小学如此‘糟糕’为什么美国大学那么牛？, 2014). Such a high pressure environment has led to reports of suicide and depression, as well as reports of bribery and cheating to gain a competitive advantage on the test (Tiezzi, 2014). In a recent conversation with my Chinese roommate, she told me a story about a head injury she got during high school after taking a nasty fall. While lying in the hospital bed, head still gushing blood, she confessed that what she was most worried about was being incapacitated for the quickly approaching *gaokao* that summer, not her head injury. Some students are able to either avoid the *gaokao* altogether, or pursue other options after not performing satisfactorily by going to study abroad instead, thereby giving up on the test, or in Chinese, 复考 (qikao). Some schools, like Shanghai Qibao High School’s spinoff private school Shanghai Qibao Dwight, even cater specifically to this group of students. Shanghai Qibao Dwight is partnered with Dwight High School in New York City and offers a more experimental, sans-*gaokao* preparation curriculum for elite students dedicated to studying abroad, also referred to as *peixunban* (培训班) or preparatory courses (Little, 2014). As my interviews reflect, these types of schools’ existing connections with American institutions serve as a funnel for Chinese students to study abroad.

Though the December 2013 Programme for International Assessment results list students in Shanghai as receiving top scores across the board in math, reading, and
science, the Chinese government is finally realizing that numerical test scores do not necessarily translate into competitiveness in the international job market (Sedghi, Arnett, & Chalabi, 2013). In response, the State Council announced in early September 2014 that the current *gaokao* system undergo reforms by 2020, incorporating measures to increase fairness and supervision, as well as stagger portions of the test itself to alleviate some of the stress usually associated with test day (Hui, 2014). Additionally, China’s “National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development,” or “国家长中长期教育改革和发展规划纲要” outlines a plan to move towards a more complete evaluation of candidates during the university admissions process (“Outline of China’s National Plan”, 2010).

However, a complete overhaul of a system that is decades old and entrenched in Confucian educational values cannot be changed overnight. The policies mentioned above will be implemented gradually, starting in large cities like Shanghai and Beijing, similar to other large-scale reforms implemented in China in recent years. In the meantime, the number of Chinese students studying abroad in the United States has continued its exponential rise. From fewer than 60,000 Chinese exchange students in the U.S. in 2000, that number has almost quadrupled, with just under 240,000 Chinese foreign exchange students in the U.S. in 2012 (“International Student Totals by Place of Origin”, 2009). In a survey of over 500 students who attended colleges in the Tianjin metropolitan area, 42.54 percent of students had chosen to study abroad, and of students surveyed, 26.49 percent had chosen to study abroad in America (Yang, 2013). Note that these statistics may be slightly inflated compared to an average Chinese
school, considering Tianjin is a modern metropolis outside Beijing, wealthier than many other Chinese cities. Even so, the high numbers of study abroad hopefuls in schools like those in Tianjin point to a rising accessibility of U.S. study abroad programs. Plus, unlike in the past, these students are not all traveling abroad for post-graduate studies. In 2013, China surpassed Korea to become the most popular origin country for high school foreign exchange students in America, with 31,899 Chinese students receiving high school F1 student visas (Liu, 2014). In wake of this “lowering age trend”, or 低龄化 (dilinghua), some students, like the elite students of Qibao Dwight private school mentioned above, even begin preparing for their pilgrimages overseas in middle school and travel abroad for high school and/or undergraduate overseas experiences. This trend did not exist in the 1980s or 1990s and represents one of the newest evolutions in Chinese foreign exchange programs.

The rapid expansion in study abroad programs for all ages has commercialized the process itself, providing a fertile market for companies looking to provide test preparation and application assistance. Some company platforms are popular websites that include online chatrooms where users can offer advice on strategies to use when applying to Ivy League colleges or insight on what kind of living conditions to expect in America (“美亚裔挤进长春藤名校难度增 华裔学子寻捷径”, 2014; “衣食学住行在美国”, 2014). Others, like New Oriental, or 新东方 (xin dongfang), have locations in virtually every city and offer GRE and TOEFL preparation, application assistance, general tutoring, and consultation services to clients preparing to study abroad. This market is also morphing, spawning more and more companies that use online platforms and
taking advantage of social media outlets (He & Chen, 2014). These companies play a large role in expediting and simplifying the study abroad application process for prospective students, further enabling overseas exchange.

**U.S. International Exchange Policy Development and Environment**

U.S. policy during the first few years of this era in Sino-U.S. educational exchange was uncharacteristically conservative, a crackdown in large part due to the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001. Enacted approximately eight months after the September 11th terrorist attacks, the Enhanced Border Security and Visa Reform Act of 2002 tightened restrictions for issuing temporary visas to tourists, business people, and foreign exchange students. Furthermore, after exchange students entered the U.S., the Act established measures to more closely monitor foreign students’ movements and registration at their chosen institutions (“Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act”, 2002). Data-sharing between government agencies was also streamlined, allowing for more efficiency in identifying foreign threats within the U.S. These measures received some criticism from the academic and business communities for their potential negative influences on attracting foreign talent (Iyer & Rathod, 2011). However, the total number of nonimmigrant entries into the U.S. only dropped briefly from 2002-2003, rebounding with even more vigor across most categories in 2004 (“2009 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics”, 2010). Throughout the 2000s, U.S. industries
enjoyed a boom in foreign students. In fact, from 2001 to 2011, foreign students holding F1 visas at U.S. universities rose from 110,000 to 524,000 (Ruiz, 2014, “The Geography of Foreign Students”). Most of this increase was due to students from rapidly developing economies, notably, China.

The U.S. market has also adapted to the rapid influx of Chinese foreign exchange students on multiple levels. First, on an overall policy level, recent developments have made significant steps in expanding the cross-cultural relationship between China and the U.S., as well as easing the process with which Chinese students enter (and stay in) the U.S. Rooted in the Obama administration’s foreign policy “pivot to Asia”, the U.S. government pushed forward multiple initiatives to solidify Sino-U.S. educational exchange. For example, the 100,000 Strong Initiative, announced in November 2009 and put into action in 2010, vows to fund increased numbers of American students to study in China (“100,000 Strong Education Initiatives”, n.d.). However, the most notable recently implemented changes are related to the new visa agreements made between China and the U.S. during this year’s November 2014 APEC Summit. President Obama and Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed agreements that would relax visa renewal requirements for Chinese students studying in the U.S., reducing the annual visa renewal requirement to just once every five years (Ruiz, 2014, “US and China Building Bridges”). This agreement gives foreign students more flexibility when finishing their degrees and searching for jobs in the U.S. In a speech appealing to American traditions and the multicultural tenets on which America was founded, Obama posed the question, “Are we a nation that educates the best and brightest in our universities, only to send
them home to create businesses in countries that compete against us? Or are we a nation that encourages them to stay and create jobs here, create business here, create industries right here in America?" (Shear, 2014). Further building on these agreements, a main part of Obama’s planned immigration law overhaul is to expand the Optional Practical Training (OPT) program, which acts as a funnel for foreign exchange students in STEM fields to enter the U.S. tech industry after graduation (“Questions and Answers”, n.d.). The program currently allows students to work in their STEM major area of study-related field while attending a university, as well as up to 29 months after they graduate, and potential expansions could include the number of eligible students, as well as the length of time students are eligible to stay in the U.S. (Scola, 2014). This is certainly appealing to foreign exchange students in the U.S., two-thirds of whom study STEM related majors (Ruiz, 2014, “The Geography of Foreign Students”). Continued policy development in this area has the potential to leverage the U.S. and China’s close student-to-student relationship to achieve mutual economic benefits.

In addition to immigration and education-related government policies, a sort of exchange student economy has emerged in the U.S. in response to the large influx of Chinese students, though in some cases this capital-driven aspect of exchange programs casts a negative light on the quality of American universities. It is popular for Chinese students who want to pursue an undergraduate degree in America to study abroad in the U.S. at least a year prior to attending college, thereby improving their English skills and allegedly easing the admissions process (“高中生留美申请”, 2014). Steven Ma realized the business opportunities these students presented when founding ThinkTank
Learning, a college consulting company for foreign exchange students in the San Francisco Bay Area. Ma develops a personal relationship with his student clients and their family members, not only providing tutoring, but also personal counseling to academically and emotionally coach high school students into top notch schools of their choosing—for a price, of course (Waldman, 2014). With excess funds and overenthusiastic parents, wealthy Chinese foreign exchange students and their families also present lucrative opportunities to universities themselves, leading to the suspicion that some universities, especially elite universities, are more likely to accept wealthy Chinese students over their Asian American counterparts with similar test scores in order to fulfill diversity quotas (Kuo, 2014). University money-making schemes also pose a problem for prospective Chinese foreign exchange students. During interviews in Guangzhou, one student brought up the ever-growing prevalence of yeji daxue (野鸡大学), or sham schools designed to extract money from international students.

Fortunately, online chatrooms function as watch dogs over the system and allow Chinese students to see lists of American schools without official accreditation that still actively recruit exchange students (“全美前100所野鸡大学名单”, 2014).

Though the boom in study abroad trends has led to some thorny issues concerning the quality of American education and preserving equality during the admissions process, Chinese students still continue to flock in droves to the U.S. every year. In the next chapter, I relay my personal experiences from working at the U.S. Consulate General in Guangzhou, China, the U.S.’s largest nonimmigrant visa post in the
world, before delving into students’ individual motivations to study abroad in the U.S. in the 1980s, 1990s, and the post-2000 era.
Chapter 3: Observations from U.S. Consulate General Guangzhou

Introduction

Upon arrival at the Consulate, I immediately revered the Foreign Service Officers there— not for their talents, though those would shine through soon enough, but for their ability to cope with such a high volume of visa traffic. Consulate General Guangzhou is the largest nonimmigrant visa post in the world, with thousands of students and tourists queuing up outside every day, many donning Ivy League school t-shirts or NYC hats. My duties as an intern varied, but my primary research was focused on the evolution of study abroad trends. This year, the increase in student visa applications was relatively low compared to previous years. When I arrived, the summer high season workload in the Nonimmigrant Visas section was up about 23 percent, nothing out of the ordinary, but student visas, which usually make up the bulk of that percentage, had only increased by 9 percent. Furthermore, data showed that graduate student applications were actually decreasing. My research goal, in short, was to figure out why.

I used a variety of research outlets to complete this project. In addition to online research with open source news and statistics, from June 2014- August 2014, I also observed two popular study abroad forums recommended by the local staff members: 美国留学, or “American Study Abroad” on bbs.netgear, a chatroom environment, and taisha.org, a general information and tips website. Next, I was granted a morning off work to do field research, during which I conducted interviews with Sun Yat-sen University students about their outlooks on studying abroad in the U.S. Lastly, to
complement my research, I was able to participate in and observe Consulate-organized events. The conclusions gained from this research project will serve as a supplement to my main thesis, adding an extra perspective to the current state of China’s educational exchange with the U.S.

Online Observations

The two Chinese forums I monitored differed greatly in writing style and presentation, but followed a similar vein of content. Rather than focus on the “why” of studying abroad, most content focused on the “how.” Here, “why” refers to the underlying educational and vocational opportunities that make up the decision to study abroad, while “how” refers to the nuts and bolts of university admission, the visa process, etc.

I found that the few articles about underlying motivations to study abroad were either personal negative experiences or sly jabs at the Chinese educational system. One student writes about how while staying up all night for days on end studying for the writing section of the GRE, “life goes on, movies are still released, and there’s still an empty seat at the banquet table.” The student then goes on to call out to all the other “students struggling upwards,” encouraging them to continue in hopes of a better future. These kinds of experiences were commonplace, and many confirm Chinese families’ fears of lonely lives abroad, sentiments that are echoed in my primary interview responses. Another student sends out a warning cry, cautioning other study abroad applicants to look closely at the schools they are applying to. 野鸡大学 (yeji
*daxue*, or what is slang for “unregistered colleges,” are rampant in America. These colleges entice wealthy foreign students with low admission standards, who then arrive, only to learn little practical knowledge and end up like the student who originally started the thread. She arrived with the hopes of a prestigious internship and ended up in a hotel washing dishes. The negative experiences observed online reflect Chinese students’ individual negative encounters with American culture and education, as well as a lack of accountability in implementation of foreign exchange programs and policies.

Other articles that offered insight into students’ underlying motivations to study abroad were described new aspects of the disparities between the American and Chinese educational systems. One article points out that Chinese schools offer a better quality education than American schools in elementary school and middle school, a theme that was also confirmed by my interview participants. The difference in quality begins in high school, where Chinese high schools dedicate the bulk of instruction time to preparing for the *gaokao*, or college entrance exam, and lack the advanced level courses, extracurricular activities, and cooperation with outside organizations that American high schools boast (“美国中小学如此 ‘糟糕’ 为什么美国大学那么牛”, 2014). Another article entitled “Why America’s Top Tier College Students Don’t Loaf Around” describes how an American college education, unlike a Chinese college education, requires integration of classwork and research (“为什么美国顶尖大学的学生很少偷懒”, 2014). These types of articles offer a fresh angle on the benefits of an international education, a phenomenon that many Chinese students have already internalized.
However, most online posts were about mundane details of the college application and visa application processes. Forums were crawling with sample cover letters, résumés, and research proposals and even served as a sort of market for buying pre-written application components. Furthermore, online you can find secrets to acing the TOEFL and SAT, as well as tips for how to become a better-rounded applicant. For some Chinese students it came as a shock that test scores alone may not be enough to gain admission to an American university. Other articles advised students on choosing a major. One in particular emphasized the quality of research and study in STEM fields at American institutions, harping on the ability for these fields to secure future job prospects and higher salaries, but at the same time stressing that choosing one’s major area of study is a family decision, not an individual decision. Others offered tips on securing a student visa, tailored to specific consulates or embassies, making claims like, “the girl with the blonde hair is mean. You’ll have better luck if you go to the window with the older man with glasses.” These small chat room posts by themselves only reflect the ramblings of one parent or the bundled up nerves of an overstressed college student. But grouped together and analyzed from a macroscopic point of view, they indicate widespread concerns with foreign exchange and potential cultural clashes starting with the application process.

**Interview Observations**

During my internship at the Consulate, I was given the opportunity to go to Sun Yat-sen University, one of China’s top tier universities in Guangzhou, to do field research
through student interviews. I approached students on campus and asked if they would be willing to voluntarily participate in a short interview for a study on Chinese study abroad trends. Please note that these were abbreviated interviews tailored to this specific summer project and serve as a supplement to my primary interviews in Chapter 4. I gathered eight total interviews from students with varying hometowns, ages, and educational backgrounds and asked questions about study abroad plans, perceived differences in education systems and cultures, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of studying abroad. These interviews yielded valuable anecdotal information about current students’ outlooks on studying abroad in the United States, as well as the perceived similarities and differences between the American and Chinese style education systems.

First and foremost, I found that students’ outlooks towards studying abroad in the U.S. are more negative than I expected. Of the eight students I interviewed, only three confirmed that they were planning on studying abroad in the U.S. Three had no plans whatsoever to study abroad, one said he had not yet decided, and one said he planned to study abroad in France after being disappointed with the overall value of an American education. Because my interviews in Chapter 4 sought out students who had either already participated in a foreign exchange program or were actively preparing to, these students’ responses help fill a gap in my research. A fifty percent rate of students studying abroad is astronomical. In 2013, China was producing 8 million college graduates per year, with just over 694,000 students abroad, meaning approximately 8.7 percent of all Chinese college students studied abroad (Bradsher, 2013; “Global Flow of
Tertiary Level Students”, 2014). Data gained from these eight students alone is by no means statistically relevant. However, the reasoning these students used to justify their decisions pointed to the beginning of the U.S.’s decline in dominance as a single study abroad destination for Chinese students. That being said, most students still recognize the value of a Western university education, more specifically an American university education compared to a Chinese university education. Six out of eight interviewees brought up the freedom of thought, critical thinking, and creativity that the American education system fosters, in stark contrast to the Chinese university system that tends to crush creativity and encourage rote memorization. One student put it best stating, “With a Western style education, students are able to look at a problem from all angles and their minds are more active. But in China, there’s a standardized track for all students that leads to more standardized thinking.”

However, a more interesting finding was that an overly positive outlook on American education and discontent with the Chinese education system did not necessarily manifest itself in the decision to study abroad. Other economic factors played a more important role. The student who had not yet decided on whether to study abroad expressed his doubts, stating, “Even if you study abroad, these days you won’t necessarily find a good job. You don’t have the same amount of time with your family members or classmates to make those connections as other people who stay in China do. Plus, with more and more people going abroad the benefits are shrinking.” This statement reflects China’s competitive job market that is being flooded with qualified applicants, most of whom have experience abroad. Students are doubtful
about the opportunity costs of spending so much money on a Western education which
does not necessarily guarantee a job, and which in some respects, may even hinder
their career development. Others are more optimistic about the future of China’s
education system. Many qualify that the problem lies not in the university education
itself, but in the university entrance system, namely the gaokao.

My overall conclusion from these interviews is that students’ final decisions are
rooted in an economic choice. If a student is fortunate enough to afford the costs of
attending an American university as part of a foreign exchange program, he/she is still
likely to take advantage of such an opportunity. Plus, as the Chinese middle class grows,
so does the number of Chinese students that have the economic resources to go abroad.
What one interviewee termed “the Chinese American dream”, or 中国人的美国梦
(zhongguo ren de meiguo meng), still exists. But unlike in past years when an education
abroad guaranteed an affluent future, students are beginning to doubt the value of the
benefits of an American education.

Remarks from Consulate Events

While in Guangzhou, I volunteered for multiple events catered to Chinese
students wanting to learn more about American culture. One was a large event that
served as a sort of pre-departure course for students preparing to study in the United
States in the fall. The others were twice weekly “open hours” events that welcomed
students to come freely into the Consulate’s Information Resource Center and read in
the library, practice English, or ask questions about the United States. It is important to
note that this is a biased pool of the Chinese populace. These students were individually motivated to seek out the American Consulate, and thus they represent a portion of the Chinese population that already has a special interest in the West. With this in mind, I noted a few prominent trends in the groups of students that passed through the Consulate doors.

First, the age ratio of the participants confirmed what the Chinese refer to as the “lowering age trend,” or *dilinghua qushi*, (低龄化趋势). Take the pre-departure orientation for example. There were approximately 75 students in attendance, ranging from middle-school aged students with nervous parents to middle-aged PhD candidates preparing to embark on specialized research programs. However, the former age group was more prevalent. Though I did not have the chance to ask each and every student his or her age and study abroad program level, the majority of the inquiries during the event’s question-and-answer session were about America’s high school and undergraduate education. Previously, studying abroad was reserved for graduate students, but now with widespread English education and knowledge that attending grade-school in the United States is beneficial when applying to colleges in the United States, more students are taking advantage of opportunities to go abroad earlier.

Additionally, through both the pre-departure orientation and the Information Resource Center open hours, I discovered that misconceptions about American life are wide and varied among Chinese college students. After the orientation, I was approached by one student who wanted to know if life for all Americans was like life on the popular television series, “Two Broke Girls.” During open hours, another student
expressed his opinions on corruption within the American government. Rather than cite events or trials that have taken place recently, the student referred to the “intrusive product placement” in American movies like “Transformers” that are released in China. “America may not be as corrupt as China,” he said, “But this proves that everyone can be bought off.”

These two fairly general observations do little to statistically prove China’s overall image of America, but they do provide valuable insight into a small portion of what will eventually be the next audience for Sino-American cultural exchange. Chinese students are exposed to American culture at an increasingly young age, but through channels that may or may not broadcast reliable information, which is especially true considering China’s extensive censorship system. Thus, students’ impressions of the United States and decisions on whether or not to study abroad in the United States may be based on something as insignificant as one sitcom the student happens to watch religiously. These misconceptions may lead to surprising or negative experiences after arrival in the United States as mentioned above, or may dissuade students from studying abroad altogether. What the responses at these events do prove is that there is a need for continued cultural exchange between Chinese and American youth to correct these false premises.

**Reflections**

Although the Chinese university system is slowly changing, decreasing the emphasis on test scores and encouraging more creativity and critical thinking,
underlying economic factors are the primary consideration when students make their
decisions to study abroad, namely a competitive edge in the job search, no matter how
slim an edge that may be. Originally, the prevailing study abroad trend among Chinese
students was to go to the U.S. for a post-graduate education, a phenomenon that still
exists. However, now students are going abroad younger and younger \textit{if they can afford
it}. This is a fundamental shift. Rather than sacrificing everything for an education abroad,
students are now more objective about the overall value of a foreign education.

Furthermore, if a student chooses to study abroad, the U.S. is no longer an
automatic first choice, a trend that is reflected in my primary interviews. This is not to
say that the U.S. does not still represent Chinese students’ primary study abroad
destination. According to UNESCO’s Global Flow of Tertiary-Level Students data set, out
of 694,365 total Chinese students abroad, 210,452 chose to study in the U.S., followed
by Japan with a distant 96,592 Chinese students and Australia with 87,497 Chinese
students (2014). However, analysis of statistics summarized in Table 3 showing the
changes in Chinese students’ top study abroad destinations, as well as their percentage
of all foreign students in the U.S. shows that the craze to study abroad in the U.S.
exclusively is beginning to diminish.
The emerging slowdown of the flood of Chinese students into the U.S. is multifaceted. Although the American education system still maintains a high level of respect, there is an emerging negative response to its high costs, the quality of life for foreign exchange students, and some of its universities’ questionable quality of education. At the same time, students still remain hopeful about their abilities to succeed within China’s education system. Chapter 4 will offer a more in-depth interview based analysis on some of the conclusions posed in this chapter.

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Table 3: Chinese Foreign Exchange Students in the U.S.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2014</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% total Chinese students abroad in the U.S.</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese foreign exchange student % total of foreign exchange students in the U.S.</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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The first row shows the percentage of the total number of Chinese students who studied abroad that decided to go the U.S. The second row shows the number of Chinese students in the U.S. as a percentage of all foreign students in the U.S. Both measures show that the U.S. still maintains its role as the number one study abroad destination for Chinese student, but that the number of Chinese students who study in the U.S. is tapering off. Statistics were compiled from both UNESCO’s Global Flow of Tertiary-Level Students and the Institute for International Education’s Open Doors Data Report. “N.a.” indicates data was not available.
Chapter 4: Interviews

Because the majority of this study is based on qualitative interview data, I will first describe my interview methods, followed by an overview of the composition of my interview candidate pool and a narration of interview responses. To review this study’s interview agreement, a complete list of interview questions, and the interview letter template used to find candidates, refer to Appendices A, B and C respectively.

Interview Methods

The interview portion of this study was completed at Nanjing University in Nanjing, China during the Chinese Flagship Capstone study abroad program. As such, many interview candidates were classmates, teachers, friends, or people who were recommended by them. Those to whom I was not personally introduced were found online through the Nanjing University individual program websites and contacted via email. While this snowball method of sampling certainly does not allow for representation of the entire Chinese college student population, taking into account the limits on time and resources over the course of this study, it was the most feasible method. All interviewees were first contacted via email or phone and then following confirmation, those who wanted to meet in person were given an individual interview time in an agreed upon private location. For the seven candidates either located outside Nanjing or who declined to participate in a one-on-one interview, their interviews were conducted via email. The other twelve were in-person interviews, each lasting from 30 minutes to an hour. Most interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, but because
many candidates themselves had extensive study abroad experience in the United States, some were conducted in a mixture of Mandarin and English. In order to ensure the accuracy of interview transcripts while also preserving a conversational atmosphere during one-on-one interviews, I took notes during interviews, then added other observations immediately afterwards.

Some bias could not be avoided during interview sessions. Participants were well aware of my identity as an American student during the interviews and on occasion referred to that identity during responses (i.e., “As you well know as an American…”). Additionally, as an American student, I was automatically biased by my personal knowledge of the U.S. education system and my experience within it. To avoid mirror imaging and other bias fallacies, I strived to maintain a neutral communication environment during my interview sessions and constructed a detailed list of interview questions, minimizing assumptions during the questioning process. Though the answers to these questions were sometimes redundant, they aided in minimizing bias during my qualitative analysis. Also, before my interviews, I sought advice from multiple Chinese advisors, adding and adjusting questions where needed.

Interview Participants

Though my use of the snowball sampling method significantly limited the diversity of my pool of interview candidates, I was still able to achieve enough diversity to yield meaningful results. Of my 19 total interview candidates, two studied in the U.S. in the 1980s, five in the 1990s, seven after 2000, with five students currently preparing
to go abroad. Of these 19, three are still in the U.S. working and participated in interviews via email. Their ages range from 22 to 65, and their birth places are concentrated mainly in China’s southeast. Nanjing is located in Jiangsu, a province in China’s prosperous southeastern region just inland from Shanghai. Jiangsu’s bordering provinces are Shandong, Henan, Anhui, and Zhejiang. Because Nanjing University is widely viewed as one of China’s top five schools, with a reputation akin to America’s Ivy League colleges, it draws talent from all over China, which is reflected in my interview pool.

![Figure 2: Interview participants by province](image)

Candidate’s major areas of studies were also varied, and are shown in the graph below:
Because of my university interview environment and snowball sampling method in finding participants, the vast majority of my interviewees are students and teachers and/or scholars. However, some participants also had previous work experience in other sectors, so though this study does not adequately represent all occupational fields, experiences outside of the academic community are also included.

**Interview Responses**

Descriptions of interview responses are divided into subtopics that inspired discussion during the interviews themselves—motivations to study abroad, study abroad preparations, impressions of America, maintaining connections, and looking to the future.
Motivations to Study Abroad:

Modern-day students’ cited reasons to study abroad listed by their frequency in interviews are as follows: a better education/research environment, personal goals such as broadening one’s world view, gaining future job opportunities, and improving language skills. These reasons are hardly surprising, the only potential new conclusion being that economic gains and marketable skills like improving job prospects and language skills which in other literature are usually emphasized as central to Chinese students’ decisions to study abroad, are here ranked last. In spite of the Chinese government’s gradual improvements in the education system, students are still underwhelmed by Chinese schools. When asked what his opinions on the American and Chinese educational systems respectively were, a student who is currently preparing to go to the U.S. for his Master’s degree said, “My classmates who went to the U.S. for undergrad told me it was all coffee and quizzes. This itself shows the difference. Chinese students only have to prepare for finals. Where American education is more continuous, Chinese students only care about the final results on tests.” When asked about the tests, one student claimed that studying for the gaokao was “the most miserable time of my life,” qualifying that statement by saying that the test had its merits because it was the most miserable time of everyone’s lives, no matter the background, providing an equal foundation for social mobility. Such a learning environment that fails to foster creativity and individual thought also contributes to modern-day students’ desires to study abroad in order to broaden their world views. One teacher who studied in Germany, Austria, and the U.S. post-2000 before returning to teach archaeology at Nanjing University best
described this trend, pointing out that in contrast to many students of the 1980s and 1990s, “…more and more people are studying the arts and humanities. More people are realizing that to enrich their lives, they need to study the arts. Peoples’ cultural needs today are more diversified because all of their basic needs are now being met.”

Modern-day students’ reasons for studying abroad are slightly different from those of Chinese students who studied in the U.S. in the 1980s and 1990s, whose ranked motivations are as follows: a better education/research environment, gaining future job opportunities, broadening one’s world view, and improving language skills. Though this group still cited a better education and research environment as their primary reason for studying abroad, instead of going to the U.S. to enjoy the benefits America’s education system in general, these individuals, all of whom planned to pursue either a PhD or post-doctoral research, revered America’s advanced research and the availability of academic resources.

When reminiscing about his experience as a visiting scholar at Harvard University in 1995, one interviewee complained that at the time, it was hard to find English theses in China, much less books, so when he went to America, he “came into contact with more materials than ever related to my field, so many books and articles that I would print out and read… but by 2006 [his following trip abroad] I realized that printing all these books out was way too heavy, and I finally got a scanner.” He still uses the books he printed out one by one in the 1990s to teach a course on selected readings in western Sinology. Another visiting scholar developed a fascination with research written by a famous interdisciplinary social scientist at Duke University. When he finally got to
meet the researcher, he was both surprised and inspired by his ability, even at the ripe age of 70, to “keep up with new things going on in American society and be able to sharply analyze this changing society.” He later discovered that the researcher was able to do so by watching scores of movies, both new and old, a habit which he also took up in order to gain a fresh understanding on the social sciences. Though these kind of anecdotes seem trite in the face of such large scale study abroad trends, they illustrate the contrast between modern-day students, who dazzled by the vogue reputations of top-tier colleges and stories from popular sitcoms, flock to American schools, and those students of the past, who idolized specific professors or American research on areas of a specific field of study before embarking on the process to go abroad.

Study abroad preparations:

The most often cited study abroad preparation for students from all time periods and backgrounds was testing. The TOEFL and GRE haunt students for months as they prepare to make their pilgrimages to U.S. universities. During the months before university applications are due, students spend hours memorizing obscure vocabulary words in the hopes that they will be of use on the GRE verbal section. When I took the GRE at Nanjing University in early December, I was able to witness some of the hysteria. For extra preparations, many of the students at Nanjing University also participated in extracurricular activities like language practice sessions at coffee shops and English clubs. At one Graduate English Club meeting I attended, students hosted an English speech competition, inviting club members to express their opinions on and compare and
contrast the “tomboy” phenomenon in both American and Chinese cultures. These kinds of speaking activities are rare for Chinese students, many of whom are more skilled at reading and writing after preparation for the English language section of the *gaokao*.

In addition to taking the required tests and applying for the programs themselves, individuals who studied in the U.S. in the 1980s and 1990s expended more effort preparing materials to apply for a visa to enter the U.S. Most individuals who studied abroad after 2000 or are preparing to study abroad scoffed when I asked about the perceived difficulty of obtaining a U.S. student visa. However, the same can’t be said for those individuals who studied abroad in China’s early years after reform and opening. Highly monitored by both the U.S. and Chinese governments and lacking the preferential policies that modern-day students enjoy, students had to spend a considerable amount of time and energy applying for a visa after gaining entrance into a foreign exchange program. Some exceptions existed, for example, if the student was backed by a very prestigious program like the Fulbright Fellowship. Fellowships like these built interview processes and stringent background checks into the application process itself, minimizing the level of scrutiny the student had to endure at the visa application stage. Five out of seven interview participants who studied abroad in the 1980s or 1990s acknowledged that they encountered challenges while applying for a visa, in contrast to only one out of twelve participants who make up the remaining interview groups. The single student from the remaining groups claims that he
encountered issues because he was studying one of the STEM fields, which after recent corporate espionage scandals involving Chinese nationals are more strictly regulated.

**Impressions of America:**

For the most part, interview participants had positive impressions of the American education system, life in America, and American culture. When prompted to describe their impressions of America, nearly every participant mentioned freedom and democracy in some capacity, whether that be generalized societal values, or freedom of expression in a classroom setting. In addition to these quintessentially American ideals, a few participants who are currently preparing to go abroad seemed to view America in a more commercial sense. When asked what his impression of America was like, one student responded, with no pause whatsoever, “Basketball.” He then went on to explain how he gets up early each morning to watch the NBA games broadcast live and how he thinks that it could be an area of mutual interest between himself and future American classmates. Another student is excited for the online shopping prospects, thinking that she will be able to preemptively assess modern fashion trends and buy products before they are sold in Chinese markets. The same student, however, also admittedly states that her perspective is skewed. Students’ impressions of America come from two sides, movies and television and government run news outlets, “Students always have these two conflicting perspectives. The news is from the political perspective and is influenced by what’s going on in the world. But judging from what I see in the movies and on TV, the social environment is good there, and there’s also a lot of freedom of opportunity.”
Students who have yet to go abroad hear about the negative experiences of others through word of mouth, news reports, and the online chatrooms used during the Guangzhou portion of this study, but seldom have many worries about going to the U.S., aside from general homesickness and initial shock due to a new cultural and academic environment.

In this case, it is useful to refer to the experiences of those who have already returned from previous study abroad experiences in the U.S. One interviewee who participated in a post-doctoral research program at Arizona State University also has mostly positive impressions of American society, but brings up lingering racism in the American south. “The Latino people were friendly to Asian faces, but there are some white guys who were not so friendly... People don’t say it, but I can feel it. It’s in the office and the work place or in the social life, even if you’re just going to Walmart. But it’s not the mainstream.” Another interviewee described an altercation she observed between two women, one white and one black, at her apartment complex in Los Angeles that escalated, causing the white woman to eventually call the police. She attributed both the origin of the argument and its escalation to racial tensions. Other interviewees cited safety issues, most prevalently, America’s comparatively liberal firearms laws. One even thought that safety played a large role in Chinese nationals’ decisions to return to China after a stint studying or researching abroad. When I asked my Chinese roommate, a Chinese graduate student at Nanjing about these issues, she said that Chinese society is generally very safe, almost void of the everyday violent crimes seen in the U.S., and because of this people “do not grow up with the sense that
they should not walk alone at night, or do not know what parts of cities they should avoid at certain times”.

In spite of these experiences, the vast majority of impressions about America are hopeful, as the U.S. retains its image as the land of opportunity, and at the very least, a materialistic mecca for young Chinese students. One participant who is currently a professor at John Hopkins’ Nanjing Center and was a visiting scholar at John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies in Washington D.C. in 1985 observed of modern-day students’ impressions of the U.S., “They all have iPads and iPhones just like Americans, and from a materialistic standpoint, there lives really aren’t that different from Americans’. Because of this, they won’t be as surprised as I was at America’s level of modernization when I first went in the 1980s. They have a more tempered view of America and view the country as an equal.”

Since reform and opening, the percent of Chinese students who pursue higher education has skyrocketed from 1.4 percent to over 20 percent (“Overview of Education in China”, 2015). Additionally, China’s middle class has expanded at an even more rapid rate. McKinsey & Co. predicts that by 2022, over 75 percent of China’s urban population will reach their definition of “middle class”—earning between $9,000 and $34,000 annually (Barton, Chen, & Jin, 2013). This broadens opportunities for Chinese students from varied social classes. Chinese society is modernizing quickly, to the extent that today’s Chinese students see the American study abroad experience as a building block for developing both personally and professionally in their own modern societies, not a metaphorical economic lifeline like it was in the 1980s and to a large extent in the 1990s.
Maintaining Connections:

Study abroad exchange programs provide a valuable people-to-people connection for Sino-U.S. economic relations, which is reflected in the interview responses. Thirteen out of nineteen total participants maintain connections to the U.S. through friends or classmates they met abroad, and many still occasionally travel back and forth for conferences. The archaeology teacher mentioned earlier leverages these connections to help her students understand American culture and the university admissions process before they make the decision to go abroad. Out of the five students interviewed who are actively preparing to go abroad, three plan to return to China, and two are undecided, one claiming it is too early to predict because America’s job market is just as volatile, and the other split between her desire to stay and work while she is young and return to China and care for her parents in their old age. Though China’s traditional values may play a role in students’ decisions to stay abroad long-term, the overwhelming number of interview participants who confirmed their continuing connections with the U.S. show that these traditions will not form a major hindrance to continued educational exchange.

Looking to the Future:

One of the keys to reaping the benefits of trans-Pacific exchange is accurately predicting and preparing for future trends. When interview participants were asked a hypothetical question about whether or not they would send their children to study
abroad, eleven responded positively, two were undecided, and five refrained from answering. This response signifies the continuity of the Sino-U.S. educational exchange; however, this exchange may not unfold according to trends analysts have recently predicted. Many tout the “lowering age trend”, or dilinghua qushi (低龄化趋势) as a defining concept in their futures analyses of study abroad developments. To a certain extent, this is true, as more and more students go abroad for their undergraduate degrees and even high school diplomas. Evidence to support analyst’s claims about the existence of this trend was also prevalent at U.S. Consulate Guangzhou public events. But at the same time, some of the qualitative data represented in this study conflicts with the “lowering-age trend”, representing age diversification rather than age-lowering. Both Chinese chatroom posts and multiple interviewees claim that China boasts more high quality fundamental education, and because of this and emotional challenges children may face when sent abroad too young, they recommend waiting until children are at least high school age. Others contend that it is important for children to receive a traditional Chinese education when they are young in order to understand their cultural roots. One interviewee stated that he had not completely decided but, “I would prefer they go through undergraduate studies in China.” When asked why, he said, “I still prefer that they keep the Chinese style and culture and traditions. The undergraduate study period is the most important period in your life to establish your value systems and culture.” In its context, this statement opposes exchange at a young age, but in the context of this entire study, it raises some interesting questions. What kind of impact
does studying abroad in the United States have on the values and cultural composition of today’s Chinese students, and how will that impact Sino-U.S. relations in the future?
Conclusions

Primary Conclusions:

Through historical contextualization, supplementary observations and interviews at the U.S. Consulate Guangzhou, as well as primary interviews of study abroad participants from the 80s, 90s, and today, this thesis concludes:

- In comparison with students from the 1980s, 1990s, and even early 2000s, today’s Chinese students have a greater freedom of choice and the economic means to take advantage of that freedom of choice. To date, that choice has overwhelmingly been to study abroad in the U.S., but both quantitative and qualitative data suggest that trend is waning as students begin to consider other countries in place of or in addition to the U.S. as study abroad destinations.

- Though modern-day students make the decision to study abroad out of desire for a better education and personal development, practical factors dictate which study abroad location and program students choose. Factors that may affect a student’s decision include the cost of a program and a country’s immigration policies, which may become even more important in the future as developed countries reach equilibrium in terms of education quality.
The student exchange trends described above call for the U.S. to adjust its education system to continue attracting foreign talent, a factor that is crucial to the economy’s continuing success. The sub-questions below, outlined at the beginning of this study, provide further insight into this thesis’ primary conclusions.

**Question 1: Why do modern-day students choose to study abroad?**

In this question, I define “modern-day” students as individuals who have studied at an educational institution or participated in formal research during the new millennium (post-2000). As follows, I used interview responses from any individual who has studied in the U.S. for either a degree or for research purposes after 2000 to answer it. Out of my 19 interview participants, twelve fell under this category—five students actively preparing to study abroad in the U.S., and seven who studied abroad in America (and in some cases, also in other places) after 2000 and have already returned to China. For the most parts, students’ answers were similar to what I predicted, and are organized from most-cited to least-cited in Table 4 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivations to Study Abroad</th>
<th>Number of Participants who Cited Motivation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Better education and/or research environment</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal development (i.e. experiencing other cultures)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved future job prospects</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improving foreign language skills</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Interview participants’ motivations to study abroad
The most-often cited reason for choosing to study abroad was for a better education and/or a better research environment, with ten out of twelve interviewees emphasizing the academic benefits of studying abroad. Right behind academic factors were factors relating to personal development, with seven out of twelve interviewees seeking to broaden their world view or experience other cultures. Surprisingly, only half of those interviewed brought up the prospects of improved future job opportunities, and only two out of eleven spoke about improving their language skills as a reason for studying abroad.

**Question 2: Why did Chinese students choose to study abroad in the United States in the 1980s, 1990s, and the new millennium respectively? How have students’ motivations changed over time?**

As described above, modern-day Chinese students’ motivations to study abroad are many and varied, but the most important reasons students cited as influencing their decisions to study in the U.S. are the academic benefits that an education abroad offers, whether in America or in another similarly developed country. In comparison, there were two kinds of responses from interview participants who studied abroad in the U.S. in the 1990s. Some chose to study abroad in the U.S. because their field of study was specifically related to the U.S. Others were itching to go see the world—any country they could get to, after China had been largely closed to foreign exchange for over twenty years. Some of these students had intentions to remain abroad. Students from the 1980s had similar motivations to pursue post-graduate degrees in the U.S., namely
for specific research of American cultural phenomena. But other students’ decisions stemmed from the fact that China did not offer doctorate degrees in many subjects at that time. These students studied abroad out of necessity, rather than by choice, due to the education system’s fundamental lack of resources in the post-reform and opening period. Recall that China was just emerging from the Cultural Revolution, during which the Education Ministry was abolished all together. Also, both individuals interviewed who studied in the U.S. in the 1980s relied completely on the support of a scholarship program and/or funding from specific exchange program. Like many individuals who sought out a foreign education in the 1980s, their options were largely limited to those that provided financial support, even after 1984 when Deng Xiaoping allowed study abroad via means other than government funding, or gongfei (公费).

As reflected in the financial aspect of individuals’ study abroad experiences, changes over time in students’ motivations to study abroad are rooted in a dramatic increase in choices. Post-reform and opening, especially when students were still dependent on government support to travel abroad, students’ choices were severely limited in spite of the theoretically liberalizing 1984 policy. Many students’ opportunities to study abroad still depended on their successes in gaining fellowships such as the Fulbright to study abroad in the U.S. Note that such fellowships were often programs that were sponsored by another government’s policies aimed at attracting talent from abroad. This forms a stark contrast with the decision process of modern-day students, who with more economic power, are armed with more choices and aided by liberal temporary immigration policies. They are virtually uninhibited in movement and
can foot the bill for a semester or more abroad. In the past, policies that affected student exchange were formed mostly in response to domestic problems, whether that be a lack of skilled workers (as in the U.S. in the mid-20th century) or a brain drain problem in China that surfaced in the early 1990s. Interview responses seldom mention the state of Sino-U.S. political relations in their answers, focusing only on the fruits of this relationship, or the study abroad choices they were afforded at the time. Thus, the connection between educational exchange and high level government relations in a post-globalization world is tentative at best. Individual motivations and economic capabilities provide the motor that drives modern educational exchange.

**Question 3: Since reform and opening in 1979, how has the changing state of Sino-U.S. political relations affected bilateral study abroad trends in general?**

Generally speaking, the change in Sino-U.S. high level political relations since reform and opening has had only a limited impact on bilateral study broad trends, except for the obvious formal establishment of relations which allowed the exchanges to begin in the first place. As explained above, qualitative findings show that in the 1980s and 1990s, students’ choices were more limited by fellowships and scholarships, which many times were indirectly connected to government programs providing funding to schools for overseas students. These policies could be associated with high-level relations, but more so on an economic rather than political level, and even with somewhat fluctuating political relations, the importance of the Sino-U.S. economic relationship has prevented the governments from severely limiting cross-Pacific
exchange. The only cases in which policies have had deep effects on exchange were in relation to events that occurred independently of formal political ties, such as the Tiananmen Square protests and the September 11 terrorist attacks and the following crackdown within the United States’ Department of Homeland Security. Leading up to and directly following the Tiananmen Square protests, the Chinese government instituted more restrictive visa policies, believing that the key to preventing the circulation of democratic ideals was to restrict travel to the countries that promoted them, thus prompting a temporary drop in the number of Chinese students studying in the U.S. In contrast, U.S. policy after the September 11 terrorist attacks was aimed at restricting entry rather than exit. These measures put a cap on temporary visa issuances and contributed to the decrease total number of nonimmigrant entries into the U.S. between 2002 and 2003. Both instances resulted in only brief fluctuations in the level of student exchange, usually rebounding within a year or two after the respective governments instituted reactive policies.

Students themselves certainly do not consider the current state of political relations when it comes to choosing a study abroad destination. Sino-U.S. relations themselves were only mentioned once in all of this study’s interviews. Students only consider the effects that are, in part, a result of the closeness of these relations, for example, the agreement made between President Obama and President Xi Jinping during the last APEC summit that allows for longer time between visa renewals for Chinese nationals visiting the U.S. Taking this into account, as students begin to judge a study abroad experience in America as equal to one in Western Europe, Australia, or
another similarly developed Asian country, adjustments to preferential policies will likely have a bigger impact on educational exchange trends in the future. For example, in the past strict visa regulations or immigration caps presented a considerable amount of red tape for Chinese students seeking to study abroad. But at that time, the value of a Western education, specifically one in the U.S., far outweighed the costs of the time and energy spent navigating bureaucratic hurdles, resulting in the continued exponential rise of Chinese students studying abroad in the U.S. However, when modern-day students are presented with multiple choices of programs, many with equally advanced credentials, visa regulations and fees, as well as laws that give them opportunities in said country after their program ends, may provide the tipping point for that student’s final decision.

**Question 4: Why, specifically, do modern-day students choose to study abroad in the United States?**

As with the interview data used in answering Question 1, “modern-day” students include individuals who are either preparing to study abroad or have already studied abroad in the United States post- 2000. Most students emphasized the quality of the education and/or research equipment in the U.S., though it is worth noting that five out of eleven interviewees also brought up that the real-world value of a U.S. education is similar to that of Western European countries, Canada, Australia, or developed Asian countries like Singapore and Japan. Some interviewees cited America as boasting the world’s best research in their fields, but most participants ended up in the U.S. simply
out of practical reasons such as a scholarship lowering the cost of study or an already existing exchange program at their Chinese institution.

Thus, it is apparent that in these students’ individual decision making processes, quality of education played an important role in the final decision to study in the U.S., but students and visiting professors, presented with a variety of program choices in multiple countries, simultaneously compared cultural environment, the costs of the program, their existing connections in the country, as well as the language environment in addition to the factor they indicated was most important—the quality of the education they would receive. In many cases, especially when interviewing older candidates that already had ample opportunities to go abroad as students and/or visiting scholars, interviewees had been to both the U.S. and one or more of the countries listed above. In many ways, this question intersects with the question of why students choose to go abroad in the first place, as students view the U.S. as one destination among many contending countries, all of which are seeking out their skill sets, cultural diversity, and tuition money.

**Question 5: What are students’ expectations of both the country and overall experience before they go? And for students who have been abroad and returned to China, were their expectations and the reality of the experience the same?**

Interview participants’ cited expectations and anticipations about their respective study abroad experiences can be separated into multiple facets: the education they will receive and/ or research environment they have access to, the
quality of life in America, their ability to communicate in the native language, and various expectations about American culture. For the most part, those who expected a high quality of education and research were not disappointed. They received instruction on complex topics such as biochemistry and futures markets that they otherwise would not have been able to continue studying in China at the time. Other popular topics of study were English and American social sciences.

However, the individuals interviewed expressed a disparity between expectations and reality when it came to their quality of life in the U.S., their ability to communicate, and American culture. For example, the majority of interview participants cited safety issues in their communities, one even going into extreme detail about a neighborhood mugging. Others, though not as many, complained about the foreign student living quarters on campus, surprised that in what they perceived as a land of prosperity, they were living in subpar, crammed dormitories. To add to their stress, many pointed out an extreme difficulty communicating, citing that their English training had been insufficient, with too much emphasis on reading and writing and not enough emphasis on speaking and listening, two skills American professors value in classroom settings. Lastly, many students misconstrued American culture itself. Some admitted to being completely ignorant of American culture before going abroad, while others perceived only amorphous concepts of freedom and individualism that they expected to manifest themselves in aspects of everyday life. However, many were taken aback when confronted with racism and conservative values.
This further supports the conclusion I came to during my research and observations at the U.S. Consulate General Guangzhou—that Chinese students prematurely form opinions about the U.S. based on incomplete, biased, or simply untrue information, which can then lead to unexpected and potentially negative experiences.

**Analytic Limits:**

This study’s limits stem mostly from limits in the scope of my interviews themselves. First and foremost, most of the interview participants I was able to find studied abroad in the 1990s or in the 21st century, even though my study covers the time period from reform and opening to the present. There is some interview data from participants who studied abroad in the U.S. during the 1980s, but with only two interviews from that group, it is not nearly as representative of study abroad trends as the data from participants who studied abroad during later time periods.

This gap in scope partially stems from an inability to meet with Chinese people who studied abroad immediately following reform and opening, many of whom stayed in the U.S. afterwards. Because I was in China for the duration of the interview portion of this study, finding those candidates who remained in the U.S., who represented the majority of those who studied abroad in the 1980s, was very difficult. Also a consequence of my being in China over the course of this study, most of my interview participants are from the Nanjing metro area, with a few from Shanghai, which is only about an hour away by train. And of that already narrow sliver of the Chinese student
populous, since I used the snowball method to find interview participants, most of my interview data is from classmates, friends of classmates, or their teachers. If afforded more time and resources, I would expand the scope of this study, seeking out more interview candidates who remained in the U.S. after their study abroad programs and a more diverse group of individuals who returned to China afterwards.

Another fundamental aspect of my study that could have affected the final results was the interview method itself. My interviews were conducted mostly in person, but in certain cases, because of time constraints and geographic location, I was also forced to conduct some interviews via email. Though this allowed me to gather more results to incorporate in my study, those interviews that were conducted electronically may lack some of the valuable personal anecdotes that the in-person interviews possess. Additionally, during these types of interviews, I lost the ability to ask immediate follow-up questions, leading to a noticeable lack of detail compared to the in-person interviews. Thus, this study should not be viewed as representative of Chinese students as a whole, and should not even be viewed as a representative of Nanjing students as a whole, rather, readers should use it as a window into the study abroad experiences of multiple Chinese students from different backgrounds and different time periods, as well as a starting point for further qualitative research on Chinese students’ changing motivations to study abroad, a topic inadequately covered by recent scholarship.

*Opportunities for Further Research:*
Following this study of Chinese students’ current motivations to study abroad in the U.S., as well as how these motivations have changed since the 1980s, there remains a great need for further research. First, as other developed countries modernize their education systems and attract more and more Chinese students, it is worth studying their development and similarities and differences with the American education system. This will allow both research and policy makers to more accurately predict how many students from what types of backgrounds will choose to study in the U.S. rather than other developed countries. And looking into the future, it will also yield information about what aspects of the U.S. education system need improving in order to attract and retain foreign talent.

Another aspect of China’s study abroad trends that requires further research is how U.S. preferential policies aimed at foreign students affect the decisions of Chinese individuals, whether students or professionals, to study or conduct research in the U.S. Is there any effect at all? Are these policies competitive with China’s own preferential policies aimed at retaining domestic talent? And what kinds of students are these policies actually attracting? These are all questions that must be answered so that the U.S. can maintain its leadership position in today’s globalized, talent-driven economy, while at the same time also advancing one of its most important economic partnerships.
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Chinese demand for overseas education remains strong despite worries about jobs


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Appendix A: Interview Protocol (Chinese)

采访协定书
白云飞

采访陈述
我姓白，叫白云飞。我是密西西比大学的三年级的学生。我的专业是中文和国际研究。谢谢你参加我的关于“中国人去美国留学动机变化的研究”。这次采访大约需要 30 分钟左右。如果您有问题或顾虑，可与密西西比大学的学术检查机构联系。他们的电话是：(662) 915-7482，电邮是：irb@olemiss.edu

同意声明
这项研究是密西西比大学国际研究专业大四论文要求的一部分，此项研究是由 Dr. Weixing Chen 的指导的。此项研究的目的是探索从 1980 年到 2014 年中国学生去美国留学动机的变化。首先，我会从 1979 年开始的中美外交关系的背景下分析动机的变化。然后，我打算采访在不同的时代去美国留学的中国人以了解他们出国留学的动机，并根据不同的年龄和不同时代留学生的特点探索他们对中美关系的看法，和对美国的观念。在我的整个研究过程中，我都会对我收集的信息保密，只会在我的最后的论文用这些信息。在这个采访中，如果一些问题你不愿意回答，你可以拒绝回答或者退出采访。你同意参加这次采访吗？
Appendix A: Interview Protocol (English)

Interview Protocol

1. Opening Statement:

   Thank you for participating in my research project exploring Chinese students’ changing motivations to study abroad in the United States. This one-on-one interview will take anywhere from 30 to 45 minutes. This study has been reviewed by The University of Mississippi’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). If you have any questions, concerns, or reports regarding your rights as a participant of research, please contact the IRB at (662) 915-7482 or irb@olemiss.edu.

2. Consent Statement:

   This research project is part of my requirements for the Croft Institute of International Studies senior thesis at the University of Mississippi and will be supervised by my primary thesis advisor, Dr. Weixing Chen. As stated, the purpose of my research is to learn more about how Chinese students’ motivations to study abroad in the United States have changed over time. Questions will be about general motivations to study abroad, outlook on Sino-U.S. relations, and views of the United States as it relates to your education. The information I collect will be used in my final research project and will be kept confidential throughout the research process. You are free to quit the research at any time and to opt out of answering any questions. Do you agree to participate in this interview? Please state “yes” or “no”.

采访问题

1. 能不能告诉我您的姓名，年龄，和出生地？
2. 能不能讲一下您的教育背景？
3. 您的专业是什么？
4. 您什么时候做出了出国留学的打算？
5. 当时，什么事让您决定出国留学？
6. 您家人是否支持您出国留学？
7. 您对中国和美国教育的看法是什么？
8. 您以前出国过吗？（按照他们的答案来调整一下下面的问题。）
9. 您出国是读什么学位的？
10. 您要出国留学的原因有哪些？
11. 您出国留学是自费，公费，还是得到奖学金？
12. 您的申请是您自己完成的还是其他机构代理的？
13. 您为出国留学做了哪些准备？
14. 您为什么选择去美国留学？
15. 您打算在美国的什么城市留学？为什么？
16. 您打算在美国哪所大学上学？
17. 您在出国前是否有联系人？（商业伙伴，朋友，家人，等等）
18. 您觉得得到美国的学生签证是否困难？
19. 您觉得您的海外经历有什么负面影响？请您描述一下。
20. 您在出国前对出国留学的经历有什么样的期望？您觉得出国留学的什么方面会让您感到惊异？生气？可怜？等等。
21. 您觉得您会从海外项目中学到什么技能？
22. 出国留学之后，您打算回中国工作还是继续留在美国？
23. 您对美国有什么样的印象？
24. 在未来，您会否保持在美国的联系？（通过家人，朋友，未来的职业目标，等等）
25. 您将来是否想要把子女送到国外读书？
26. 如果我在未来有更多问题的话，我可以再一次联系您吗？
已经从在美国的留学经历回中国的参加者

1. 能不能告诉我您的姓名，您的年龄，和您的出生地。
2. 请您描述您的教育背景。
3. 您的专业是什么？
4. 您什么时候做出了出国留学的打算？
5. 当时，什么事让您决定出国留学？
6. 您家人是否支持您出国留学？
7. 您对中国和美国教育的看法是什么？
8. 您以前出国过吗？（按照他们的答案来调整一下下面的问题。）
9. 您出国是读什么学位的？
10. 您要出国留学的原因有哪些？
11. 您出国留学是自费，公费，还是得到奖学金？
12. 您的申请是您自己完成的还是其他机构代理的？
13. 您出国留学之前做了哪些准备？
14. 您为什么选择去美国留学？
15. 您在美国的什么地方上学？为什么？
16. 您在美国哪所大学上学？
17. 去美国之前，您已经有了在美国的联系人吗？（商业伙伴，朋友，家人，等等）
18. 您觉得得到美国的学生签证是否困难？
19. 您打算在未来再一次留学吗？在美国吗？为什么？
20. 您在海外留学的时候遇到了什么挑战？您在美国有什么负面的经历？
21. 您出国之前，您对海外的留学经历有什么期望？
22. 您原来的期望实现了吗？请您描述一下。
23. 您对您的经历有什么珍贵的回忆？在海外的时候，什么事情让您感到震惊？
24. 您在海外的时候，您学到什么技能，积累什么样的知识和经验？
25. 您回中国以后，这些在海外学到的技能起到了什么作用？
26. 您对美国有什么样的印象？
27. 您现在的印象跟您去美国以前的印象一样不一样？
28. 在未来，您会否保持在美国的联系？（通过家人，朋友，未来的职业目标，等等）
29. 您将来是否想要把子女送到国外读书？
30. 如果我在未来有更多问题的话，我可以再一次联系您吗？
Appendix B: Primary Interview Questions (English)

Interview Questions

Participants Preparing to Study Abroad in the U.S.:

1. Please state your full name, age, and place of birth.
2. Describe your educational background.
3. What is your major area of study?
4. When did you first get the idea to study abroad?
5. What prompted it?
6. Does your family support your decision to study abroad?
7. What is your opinion of the Chinese and American school systems?
8. Have you been abroad before? If yes, where? (If yes, slightly change some of the more general study abroad questions below to include all previous experience as well as future experience.)
9. What subject(s) do you plan to study while abroad?
10. What factors made you want to study abroad?
11. Is your study abroad program self-funded, government-funded, or funded by a scholarship?
12. Did you receive help from specialized Chinese companies while completing your study abroad applications? Or did you complete the whole application without outside help?
13. What kinds of preparations are you making to study abroad?
14. Why did you choose the U.S. as a destination?
15. Where do you plan to study in the U.S.? Why?
16. What school in the U.S. do you plan to attend?
17. Do you already have ties to the U.S.? (Business, family, etc.)
18. How would you describe the process of obtaining a student visa to enter the U.S.?
19. Do you think there will be any drawbacks from studying abroad? Describe them.
20. What expectations do you have for studying in a foreign country? What do you think will be exciting, challenging, or memorable?
21. What skills do you think you will gain from your overseas experience?
22. After your study abroad experience, do you plan to return to China or stay in the U.S. to pursue a career, further studies, etc.?
23. What is your current impression of the U.S.?
24. In the future, do you plan to maintain ties to the U.S.? (i.e. through family, future career plans, friends made abroad, etc.)
25. Hypothetically speaking, in the future, would you send your children to study abroad?
26. Would allow me to ask follow-up questions about this project or your interview in the future?

Participants Already Returned from a Study Abroad Experience in the U.S.:

1. Please state your full name, age, and place of birth.
2. Describe your educational background.
3. When did you first get the idea to study abroad?
4. What is your major area of study?
5. What prompted it?
6. Does your family support your decision to study abroad?
7. Had you been abroad before your trip to the U.S.? If yes, where? (If yes, slightly change some of the more general study abroad questions below to include all previous experience as well as future experience.)
8. What is your opinion of the Chinese and American school systems?
9. What subject(s) did you study while abroad?
10. What factors made you want to study abroad?
11. Is your study abroad program self-funded, government-funded, or funded by a scholarship?
12. Did you receive help from specialized Chinese companies while completing your study abroad applications? Or did you complete the whole application without outside help?
13. What kinds of preparations are you making to study abroad?
14. Why did you choose the U.S. as a destination?
15. Where did you study in the U.S.? Why?
16. What college in the U.S. did you attend?
17. Did you already have ties to the U.S.? (Business, family, etc.)
18. How would you describe the process of obtaining a student visa to enter the U.S.?
19. Do you plan on studying abroad again? If yes, in the U.S.? Why or why not?
20. Have you experienced any drawbacks from studying abroad? Describe them.
21. What expectations did you have for studying in a foreign country before your departure?
22. Were these expectations accurate? Explain.
23. What did you think was exciting, challenging, or memorable?
24. What skills did you gain from your overseas experience?
25. How have these skills helped you since you returned to China?
26. What is your current impression of the U.S.?
27. Is this impression any different from your impression of the U.S. before you studied there?
28. In the future, do you plan to maintain ties to the U.S.? (i.e. through family, future career plans, friends made abroad, etc.)
29. Hypothetically speaking, in the future, would you send your children to study abroad?
30. Would you allow me to ask follow-up questions about this project or your interview in the future?
尊敬的教授：

您好！

我叫白云飞，在密西西比大学攻读国际研究与中文双本科学士，目前在南京大学进修。除了选修南京大学的课程以外，我也在写我的毕业论文—“中国人去美国留学动机变化的研究”。

这项研究是密西西比大学国际研究专业大四论文要求的一部分，此项研究是由 Dr. Weixing Chen 指导的。此项研究的目的是探索从 1980 年到 2014 年中国学生去美国留学动机的变化情况。首先，我会从 1979 年开始的中美外交关系的背景下分析动机的变化。然后，我打算采访在不同的时代去美国留学的中国人，以了解他们出国留学的动机，并根据不同的年龄和不同时代留学生的特点探索他们对中美关系的看法，对美国的观念。在我的整个研究过程中，我都会对收集的信息保密，只会在我的论文使用这些信息。

我希望能在南京大学找到愿意参加我研究采访的曾在美国留学过的教授。这次采访大约需要 30 分钟。如果您感兴趣，请跟南京大学领航项目的白云飞联系。

电话：17705162035；电邮：aebartel@outlook.com

此致
敬礼！

白云飞
2014 年 10 月 6 日